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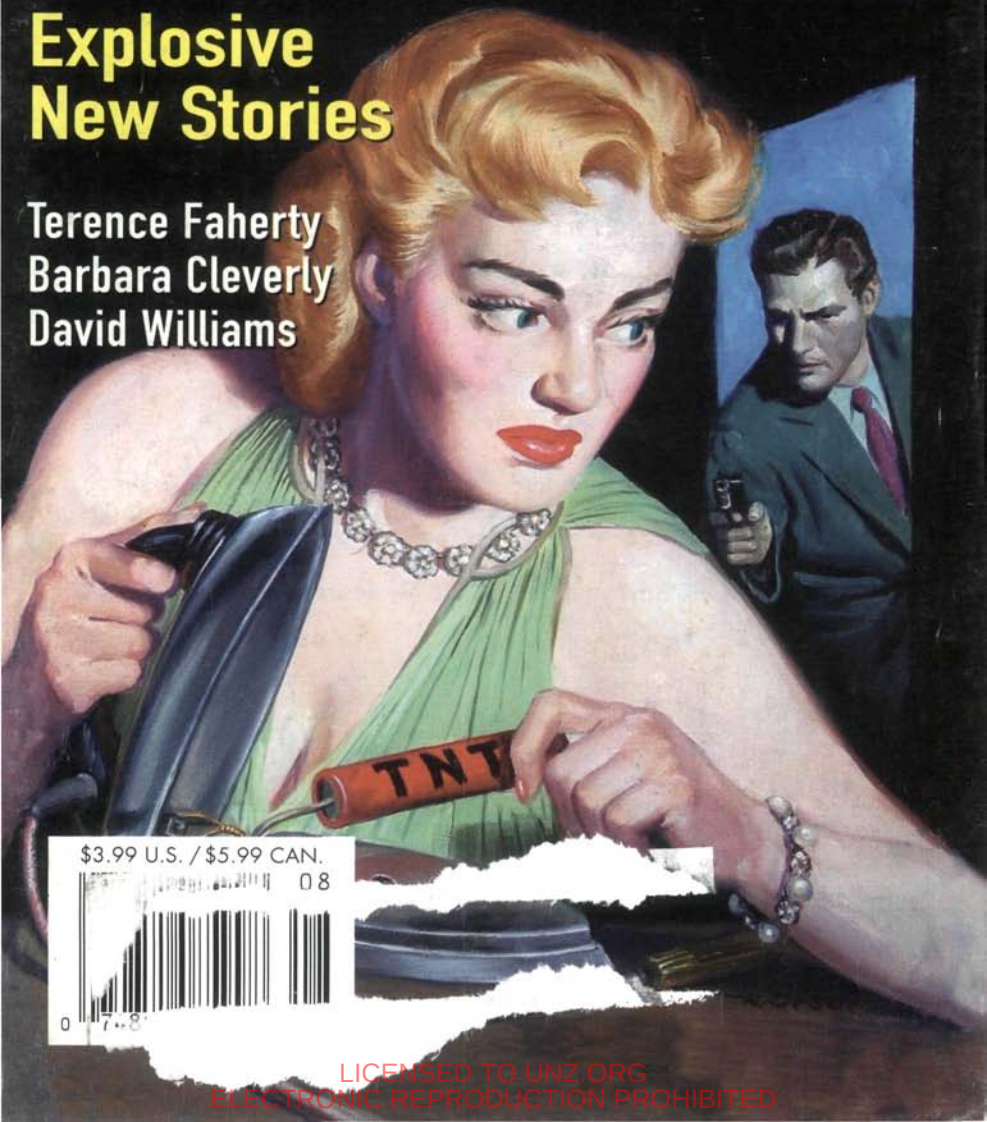

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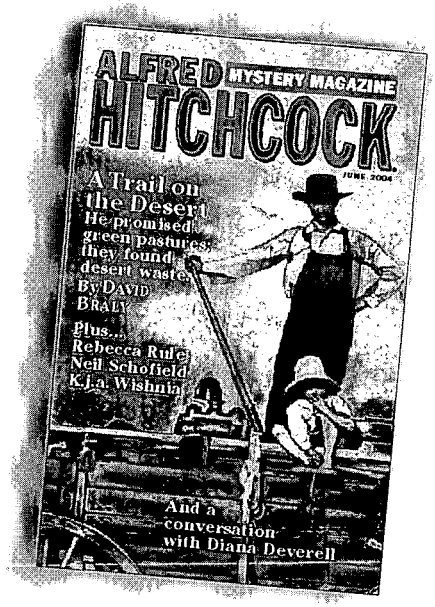

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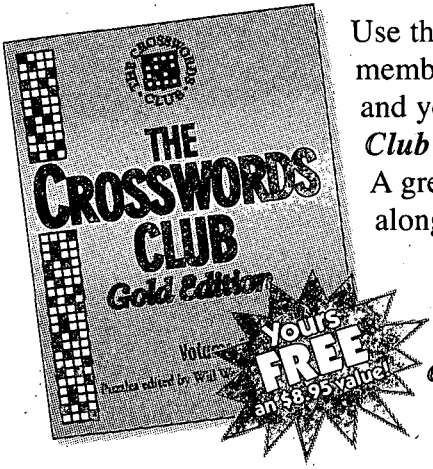

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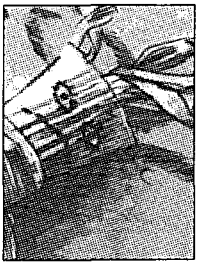

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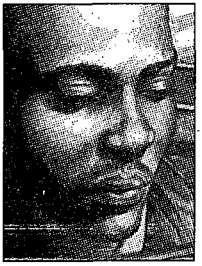

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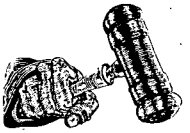

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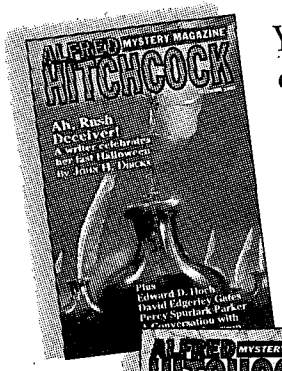

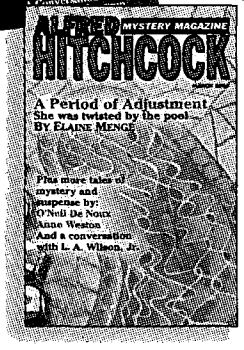
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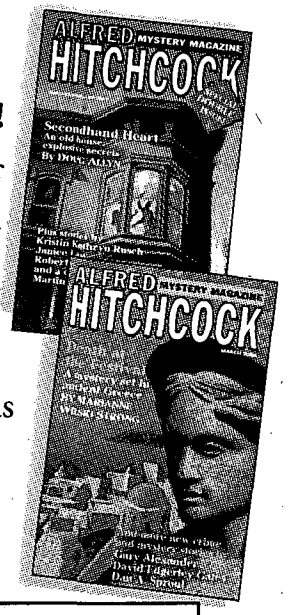

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Art by Mark Evans

A Sunday in Ordinary Time

by Terence Faherty

1.

"Welcome to St. Joseph the Worker," the woman behind the lectern said. "Today is the twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time."

Ordinary time, I repeated to myself, ignoring the rest of her greeting. That term, I knew, was just the Catholic Church's way of saying that it wasn't Advent or Christmas, wasn't Lent or Easter. But it was also far from an ordinary time, an ordinary Sunday.

For one thing, I was in a church, a place I didn't often visit. And I wasn't the only special-occasion congregant. The old 'sixties-vintage building had an Easter crowd on this ordinary September Sunday.

And the church had American flags prominently displayed, a common feature back when I was a kid that had gone out of fashion since. Many of the people around me were similarly decorated,

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with flag pins and red, white, and blue ribbons. One old man, whose red-rimmed eyes had met mine when I'd entered, held an actual flag in his big fist, the kind of toy flag kids waved at parades. In ordinary times.

The hymn with which we greeted the celebrant was "America the Beautiful." The lines about "heroes proved in liberating strife" caused the woman beside me to begin to sniff. When the choir reached the last verse and sang about "alabaster cities . . . undimmed by human tears," the woman's sniffing became sobbing. I patted her shoulder.

Terence Faherty's Owen Keane series occupies the more thoughtful end of the mystery spectrum. Though Keane is occasionally involved in rousing action, his claim to readers' attention is more often his reflections on the characters he meets and the society in which they live. This new case is no exception. A collection of Keane stories, entitled *The Confessions of Owen Keane,* is due from Crippen & Landru Publishers this autumn.

The celebrant was a boy priest named Plezniak. He had a dazed look, as many of us did. Tired and dazed, in his case. After reading us the Gospel, he left his pulpit, descended from the altar, and stood in the center aisle, looking suddenly small and squat in his green vestments.

"There are many reminders of this terrible week in our church today," he began. "The flags, the music, the tears. Not that any of us here in Carteret need additional reminders. We only have to walk outside and look to the north to see the smoke from the World Trade Center fires."

It was more of a haze now, certainly not the billowing plume of the prior week, just a whitish-brown smudge in the sky beyond Staten Island. Several people had told me that they could smell the fire when the wind was right, but I'd been spared that. The normal smells of this old North Jersey city, the ones coming off the stretch of water called the Arthur Kill and the aroma of the nearby oil refineries, were still too new and overpowering.

"To be honest, though," Plezniak continued, "there can't be any place in America that needs a reminder of what has happened. They can't see the smoke in Ohio or New Mexico, in Minnesota or Oregon, but the people there are thinking of New York and Washington and a field in Pennsylvania this morning, as we are. Their hearts are in those three places, as ours are.

"I'd planned to speak on evil today, on the continuing presence of evil. But I've decided not to. On this Sunday, we don't need to be reminded that evil exists in the world any more than we need a

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reminder of the rescue efforts going on across the bay."

He paused for so long I thought that might be it. Then he started in again. "All week we've gotten calls at the rectory from people wanting to know what they could be doing to help, and calls from people who were just trying to find a way to get through each day, a way to deal with the pain and the confusion. And I found that I was giving the same answer to both types of caller, the ones who wanted to help and the ones who needed help. The answer was that they should find some positive thing close to home to do."

The priest had a very unseasoned face, its youth accentuated by his hair, which managed to be both short and unruly. But this morning his voice had the wear of ages in it.

"It's the same answer I would have given a month ago to a person overwhelmed by the evil in the world. I'd have said to such a person, 'Turn off your television, stop wallowing in despair and helplessness, leave your home, and find one thing you can do to make the world a better place.'

"A month ago that kind of call was rare. Most of us were too distracted by our own worries and dreams to give more than a passing thought to the evil in the world. This past week I suspect that many of us had a hand on the phone at one time or other, ready to make a call to someone, anyone, who could help us with our pain.

"In a moment we'll continue our celebration of an event, Christ's death and resurrection, that offers us the hope of tremendous good coming out of crushing evil. That hope can and will comfort us.

"But don't discount the power of small, insignificant acts of goodness to counteract a crushing evil. If you find yourself in despair today or in any of the days and nights ahead, turn off your television, go out into the world, and find your own personal act of goodness to perform."

2.

At the very end of the Mass, the lay reader returned to her lectern to read us the parish announcements that we could have read just as well for ourselves in the bulletin if we'd cared to. When she'd finished, Plezniak stood, drawing us all to our feet. He started for the center of the altar to say the final blessing, stopped midway, and turned to face us.

"On the subject of small acts of goodness, the family of Martin Kolczak is organizing a neighborhood search today. As many of you know, he's been missing since Friday. They've asked all volunteers to meet in the church parking lot after this service. Let us pray."

I hadn't heard about Martin Kolczak, but then I hadn't been paying much attention to local news. When the Mass ended, I filed out with the crowd and wandered toward the corner of the parking lot where the volunteers were gathering.

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Not that I was volunteering for anything. I not only doubted the power of small acts of kindness to counteract a tremendous evil, I had reason to believe, based on a lifetime's research, that small, kind acts, done at the wrong time and in the wrong place, could actually spark the evil. But I'd never been able to resist a mystery, and I was reluctant to give up the sense of community I'd felt in the packed church.

There was plenty of that feeling on display among the milling volunteers. Although the crowd was much smaller than the one that had attended the eleven o'clock service, it was also much more sociable. People were hugging one another, shaking hands, calling out to neighbors and friends. Not that the mood was upbeat. The gathering had the feeling of a wake, but an odd one, a wake at which all the mourners were also family.

None of the members of that family spoke to me at first, which was okay. A vicarious feeling of community was as much as I ever hoped for. But then, just as we were being called to order, someone tugged at my elbow. It was the woman whose shoulder I'd patted at the beginning of the service. She was a small woman whose lined, sallow face and dark, sunken eyes took me back to my childhood parish, reminding me of the mothers and grandmothers of my Italian friends.

She whispered, "Thank you," and then turned to face the speaker.

He was standing in the bed of a pickup truck, holding a bullhorn that he never got around to using, a thirty-something guy in golf shirt and khaki safari shorts. I decided that his build and boot-camp haircut and general air of authority marked him as an off-duty cop, but I never bothered to verify the guess.

"Attention, everybody. Let's get settled. We need to get started as soon as possible, to make the most of our daylight."

The crowd unsettled at that, perhaps because of the suggestion that this good deed might take the whole day.

When the buzzing died down, the man on the truck said, "First I'd like to thank you all on behalf of Irene Kolczak, Martin's sister." He gestured to his right, to a figure all but hidden by the crowd.

"Just to recap, Martin Kolczak is an eighty-year-old Alzheimer's victim who wandered away from his home on Dewey Avenue on Friday afternoon and hasn't been seen since. His immediate neighborhood has been searched pretty thoroughly without result. Today, with your help, we're going to expand that search to include the entire city."

That sounded more ambitious than it really was. Technically a borough and not a city, Carteret had a population of only about twenty thousand.

"Our plan is to divide you into teams of two. Each team will be

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given one or more city blocks to canvass. You're to knock on doors, talk to people, show Martin's picture around. We've pictures enough for all of you; is that right, Betty?"

Betty's offstage voice said it was.

The cop then echoed Father Plezniak. "Over in Manhattan today, there are a lot of people walking around with pictures of loved ones they're trying to find. We can't help those people. Probably no one can. But we're going to make a difference right here in Carteret. We're going to find Martin Kolczak."

3.

The man with the bullhorn broke the crowd into several lines, each leading to a volunteer with an armload of paper. It was the moment to wander off, but I joined a line instead. The sallow-skinned woman followed behind me. While we waited, she gave me the unauthorized version of the Martin Kolczak story.

"An actuary," she said. "Before he retired. Worked for an insurance company for forty years. A big man at St. Joseph's. Everybody knows him. How could he just disappear?"

That was the question that had gotten me into line. My confidential source had her own theory.

"Something fishy about it. A man wanders off in broad daylight and no one notices. And that sister of his, who was supposed to be watching him, where was she? Asleep, I heard. Taking a nap. Three o'clock in the afternoon. Nice work if you can get it."

The little woman had no sooner damned the sister for sleeping on duty than she upped the charges against her. "But who's to say she was napping? What could be easier than leaving the door unlocked and looking the other way? Or sending the poor guy on an errand? Two minutes out the door he forgets where he's going, maybe forgets the way home. You know he has plenty of insurance, him who worked with it all his life."

Actually, I thought it just as likely that Kolczak had no insurance. I'd known enough mechanics whose cars were wrecks and doctors who smoked. I didn't mention them to the little woman who shuffled along at my side. Something had caused her to reexamine her position without my help. Maybe it was that whitish-brown haze to the northeast, hovering over all of us like an admonition against pettiness. Maybe the unkindness of her words had finally registered, had been able to register because of the peculiar quiet of this day. Or maybe the change of heart was simply due to the unobstructed view of Kolczak's sister we'd gotten as our line had inched forward.

"Shame on me," my confidant said. "Shame on me."

At first glance, you wouldn't expect Irene Kolczak to inspire such contrition. She was one tough-looking woman, maybe in her sixties,

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maybe in her seventies. Her dyed and lacquered brown hair made it tough to judge, as did her face, which was broad and flat-cheeked and largely unlined. Her nose was also flat—if she'd been a man I would have suspected a football injury. Her small eyes were unhopeful and her lips ungenerous. Though the day was mild, she wore a leather car coat and held the collar of it closed with fingers that had been misshapen by something, possibly arthritis.

Sooner than I'd expected, we were at the head of the line and I was being introduced to my partner. I'd resigned myself to the company of the little Italian woman who was dogging my steps, but the volunteer working our line split us up, pairing me with a woman who looked young enough to be a student somewhere.

When we introduced ourselves, she repeated my name, Owen Keane, several times, committing it to memory. Her name, Moira Wyszynski, suggested the kind of mixed breeding that was North Jersey's saving grace. She was dressed in jeans and a lightweight sweater trimmed in faux leopard fur. Her full lips were painted lavender, though the cosmetics company had surely given the hue a more interesting name. The same shade appeared on her nails, which flashed every time she raised her cup of Starbucks coffee. Her eye makeup, in contrast, was plain old black, but there was plenty of it. Her light brown hair had blond highlights that looked as if they'd been made with a fluorescent marker, and it was cut in the current fashion, which called for the strands to curve inward toward her face, their ends always threatening to enter her mouth.

That threat was made all the more real by a characteristic of Moira's mouth, which was that it was very seldom closed. But I didn't pick up on that right away. The frazzled volunteer who gave us our final briefing—Betty, the photo authority—did most of the talking.

"Here's a photograph for each of you. And here's a map with your streets marked in green. You'll be on Randolph Street, the two and three hundred blocks. The phone number of the police is written on the bottom of your sheets. Call them if you have any trouble. They know we're going to be out today. The other number rings in our command center. Call that if you find Mr. Kolczak or anyone who's seen him or if you have any questions. You have a cell phone, right?"

I looked to Moira, who was nodding.

"That's it, then," Betty said. "Good luck."

She started to turn to the next team, but my partner held her in place with a hand tipped in lavender. Bending slightly so she could look the shorter woman in the eye, Moira said, quite slowly, "We will find him."

❖ ❖ ❖

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4.

That rash promise was the only slow thing I ever heard Moira say. Before we'd driven a block—in her little Korean car, at her insistence—she'd told me that she was a native of nearby Montclair, that she was twenty-six, that she worked as an assistant buyer for a department-store chain, that she'd only recently moved to the Carteret area, and that she'd heard about the search on a local radio station.

To be fair, she'd given me a chance to speak, asking me where I worked—Home Depot, as an assistant everything—and how long I'd lived in Carteret. That last question had been prompted by our inability to find Randolph Street.

"I just assumed you were a native," Moira said as we straightened ourselves out with the aid of the Xeroxed map Betty had given us. "I figured they'd teamed me with an old hand 'cause I'm a newbie."

"I've only been here a couple of months," I said. I might have gone on to say that I'd picked Carteret because I'd once known a man by that name and liked him. I might even have remarked on an interesting coincidence, which was that the man I'd known had suffered from memory loss, like Martin Kolczak, though Carteret's had been caused by a hunk of shrapnel. But Moira didn't give me that much air time. She'd found us on the map, and we were off again.

As she drove, Moira discoursed on Alzheimer's. "Know much about it, Owen? I looked it up on the Internet last night. I thought it might be useful to have some background."

"Good thinking," I said, smiling to myself at how quickly she'd gotten comfortable with my first name, how comfortable she was with the idea of being alone for the day with a stranger twice her age. She was more than comfortable with the situation, she was in command of it, lecturing more than briefing me as we careered along.

"Alzheimer's affects about four million Americans. It's basically a disease that kills brain cells. It's progressive, too. You lose your recent memories first, then your long-term memories, then your ability to function at all.

"Alzheimer's victims are all prone to wandering off, like Mr. Kolczak did. They might do it because they're disoriented or frightened or just restless. Or they might feel they have to go to work or fulfill some other commitment, maybe a commitment that's twenty years in the past."

So much for the Internet experts. Moira had her own theory about the cause of Kolczak's disappearance. "I think it had to be the terrorist attacks. I mean, I watched the tape of that second plane hitting a dozen times, didn't you? I've heard that watching it over and over is bad for you, but I'm not so sure. Because anything you watch over and over again, even a horrible thing like that, you get used to. You get numb to.

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"But imagine you're Martin Kolczak, with no short-term memory. The television stations keep showing that moment of video, and each time it's new to you. So you never get used to it, you never develop those emotional calluses. Tell me that wouldn't drive you into the street."

The problem with her theory was that it denied the possibility of a beneficial cumulative effect—numbing—while positing a harmful one. If Kolczak had been forgetting the attack between viewings of the video record, he could never have reached the point of overload. He would never have progressed beyond the stunned disbelief we'd all experienced in those first terrible minutes. Not unless there was some emotional memory at work, something unimpaired by his disease.

I didn't voice the objection since Moira didn't open the floor to discussion. Instead, she shifted back to the question of our pairing.

"I bet they put us together because of our ages. They want each team to be able to relate to anyone who answers the door, no matter what age the person happens to be. So I should talk to the young ones. And you should talk to the, ah . . ."

"Seasoned ones?"

One look at Randolph Street convinced me that I'd be going hoarse in a hurry. The age of the street was reflected by its curbs, which were stone and almost buried under the patched pavement's many layers. The houses represented some kind of intermediate stage between the row homes of a city and the stand-alones of a true suburb. They were detached, but only just, three stories high counting attic dormers, and narrowly fronted. Their cellars stuck up out of the ground a few feet, as evidenced by the tiny windows around the base of each house and the half-dozen steps required to connect their front doors to the rolling sidewalk.

Our mode of operation, established at the first house, was for both of us to squeeze up these steps, as narrow as they were steep, and ring the bell. Then, depending on the age of the person who answered, one of us would fall back. I was pleasantly surprised to find that I was doing the falling more often than not. The old houses were turning over, evidently, and the post-war generation, Martin Kolczak's generation, was giving way to a much younger one.

Younger and more ethnically diverse. Moira might have better used her time on the Web brushing up on her Spanish and Ukrainian. Luckily, her facility for English, combined with a theatrical flair, got her through every time. From the bottom step of staircase after staircase, I watched her all but act out Kolczak's disappearance, admiring her body language certainly, but also her enthusiasm.

My own was waning. The people I was talking to were sometimes hard of hearing, sometimes vision-impaired, and never very interested in my questions. One man was actually belligerent.

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He answered his door in a sleeveless undershirt and rumpled trousers, carrying a newspaper, also rumpled. He must have been Kolczak's age, but he was in better shape mentally. Physically, too, probably. Though his skin was sagging generally, there was still muscle underneath it.

Every house we'd visited had a flag out, even if it was only the paper one the local weekly had provided. This house had several and something I was willing to bet was unique on all of Randolph Street. In one front window hung a little banner of sun-faded silk, maybe a foot long and six inches wide. On it were sewn two stars, one above the other, the top one gold and the bottom one blue.

The man in the undershirt let me get through half of my spiel before he cut me off by thrusting his newspaper at me. "Everything that's going on and you're worried about one old crazy? Get out of here!"

Our only other exchange of note took place near the end of our second block, at a house whose brick had taken on a heavy coating of stucco at some time in the past, making it look like a badly iced cake. A flag staff had been mounted on the front doorframe and quite recently; where the molding had been chiseled away to make a flat spot for the base, the raw wood was unweathered and clean. So was the flag that moved in the gentle breeze, nudging Moira as she rang the bell.

There was nothing remarkable about a brand-new flag, not this week. We'd sold out of flags at the Home Depot in the days following the attacks. It wasn't until Moira froze in the act of pushing this particular flag away from her face that I started paying attention.

The man who'd opened the door was young and thin and frightened. He had every reason to be frightened on this particular Sunday, since he was very obviously of Middle Eastern descent. However hard my week and Moira's had been, they can't have compared with his.

His age made him my partner's to question, but for once the power of speech deserted her. I smiled and held up Kolczak's photograph.

"Sorry to bother you. We're looking for a man who wandered away from his house over on Dewey Avenue. Have you seen him?"

The young man hadn't taken his dark eyes from my smile. It must have held up, because he finally dropped his gaze to the photograph. Then he shook his head and, almost bowing, shut the door.

5.

That encounter left Moira subdued. But she'd recovered by the time we'd checked the last house on our last block.

"I just don't feel like giving up, Owen," she said as we started back for her car. "How about we try another street?"

"I don't think so."

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Her eyes were quite blue, a fact more disguised than highlighted by all the mascara. They flashed at me now. "Do you want a ride back to the church or can you walk?"

"Not without my cane," I said, trying to raise a smile. I added, to redeem myself, "I'm not giving up. But we're not going to find Kolczak by knocking on doors."

"How, then?"

"By asking questions. I've had a little experience finding people."

"The ones who get lost in the lawn and garden department?"

Before I could correct her impression of my life's work, she let up on me. "Sorry. I'm sure you haven't always been at Home Depot. Were you some kind of investigator?"

That sounded vague enough to cover me. "Yes."

"So how did you find people?"

An accurate description of my technique would have mentioned chasing every red herring and charging down every blind alley that came along. I summarized. "I tried to get to know the missing person, to understand them. I got inside the person's head."

"The inside of Martin's head is a blank slate."

"Not blank yet. He left the house for a reason. If we can figure out why he left, it could tell us where to look."

We'd reached her little Hyundai. Moira jiggled a ring that held enough keys for a dealership and said, "Give me a for instance."

"Okay. You said an Alzheimer's victim might wander off because he thinks he has to go to work. It could be as simple as that."

"Somebody must have thought of that already. And why wouldn't someone at his workplace have noticed him?"

"He wandered off on a Friday afternoon. The office might have been closed when he got there. He might be sitting there now, waiting for it to open."

"Office? For all we know he was a bricklayer."

"He worked for an insurance company," I said, giving away my only piece of inside information.

It turned out to be a sound investment, since it tipped Moira my way. "Who could tell us where his old office is?"

"His sister," I said. "Irene."

If I'd been on my own, I would have been second-guessing all the way to Dewey Avenue. For example, there was a good chance Irene wouldn't be at the address she'd shared with her brother. She might still be in the parking lot at St. Joe's or at the "command center" we'd heard about, where we wouldn't be able to question her without first explaining ourselves to the people running the search. Or the Kolczak house might *be* the command center, in which we wouldn't find Irene alone.

But Moira was convinced that she could talk her way past any

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obstacles. I found her confidence so infectious that I just listened to the cryptic rhythms she punched up on the radio and enjoyed the ride.

As it turned out, we didn't have to put Moira's confidence to the test. Irene was at home, her only company a neighbor lady who retreated to the kitchen to make coffee when Irene reluctantly invited us in. We sat in a living room I'd been in a hundred times before in other remote corners of New Jersey. It was the architectural equivalent of an old gym shoe: aromatic, broken-down, and comfortable.

"You really should report to the command center," Irene told us. "Over in the church basement. I asked them not to have it here. I couldn't stand all the coming and going."

She still looked as hard as her varnished hair, but her voice was gentle, with the slightest trace of a *w* every time she pronounced an *r*.

Moira said, "We'd like to try a different approach, Irene. We'd like to figure out why Martin left."

Irene got so defensive so quickly that I wondered if there might be something to the gossip I'd listened to back at the church lot.

"Why he left? What do you mean? Do you think somebody did something to him?"

"Of course not," Moira said soothingly. She surprised me then by giving an earlier theory of hers an airing. "Except maybe the terrorists. I mean, we've all been upset. Did the news reports of the attacks bother your brother?"

"They made him restless. So I turned them off. Then he forgot what had happened."

"And settled down?" Moira prompted.

Irene nodded, but I could tell she was still thinking about it. Meanwhile Moira was signaling me to jump in.

"We thought your brother might have left because he felt he had to be somewhere," I said. "Like his job."

"They thought of that," Irene said. "But the insurance company where he worked, Consolidated, went out of business ten years ago."

"Where did he work before that?" Moira asked. "He may be using very old memories."

"Nowhere but Consolidated. Except for the defense plant where he worked during the war. But that was over in Union, where we lived back then. It made ball bearings."

"Let's stick with Consolidated for the moment," I said. "Did anyone check the building where the company used to be located?"

Irene blinked at me. "I don't know. I'm not even sure where it was exactly. I was still living in Union when Martin got the actuary job. I was taking care of our mother. I didn't come back here until after she passed. Not even then. Not until after Martin got sick."

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It was a thumbnail autobiography if I'd ever heard one. The woman with the hard face and the gentle voice had been a caregiver all her life. First for her mother and then for her brother.

"Who would know where the building was?" I asked. "Do you know the names of any of your brother's coworkers?"

"No," Irene said. And then, "Wait. He got a Christmas card from one of them every year."

She padded off, and I noticed for the first time that she'd traded her shoes for carpet slippers. When she returned, she was carrying a little red basket that contained the Kolczak family's tiny cache of nearly year-old Christmas cards. Few as there were, it took Irene some time to sort through them with her gnarled fingers.

"Here it is. I always save the envelopes. Walter Odle. His address is 333 Carteret Avenue."

6.

On the way to Carteret Avenue, I asked Moira if she thought our hostess had acted strangely.

"Caregiver fatigue," she said. "I read about it last night. People who care for Alzheimer's patients wear out in a hurry if they don't empower themselves, don't give themselves permission to still have a life."

I spent the remainder of the short drive wondering whether I'd ever met a person less empowered than Irene Kolczak.

Walter Odle was working in the little front yard of his bungalow when we pulled up. He was somewhere between Moira and me in age, which meant he must have been a fairly junior member of the insurance company Kolczak had left fifteen years ago.

Odle was a short guy who needed more exercise than the chrysanthemums were giving him. His smile was genuine from the start, but it got positively warm when Moira mentioned Martin Kolczak.

"How is the old guy? I really miss him. I didn't work with many white guys of Martin's generation who were as friendly to me as he was."

Odle's face literally drooped as my partner explained the situation. "Alzheimer's? Martin? I did not know that. Trouble with Consolidated going under, besides me getting tossed out on the street, was that it scattered everybody, broke up the network. I don't hear the news."

"We're here because of Consolidated," I said. "We think Martin might have gone to his old office."

"Thinking he's still in harness? That makes sense. Trouble is, the office is gone. They tore the building down when they expanded the turnpike exit a few years back."

Moira's nails pressed my arm. "Martin may not remember that.

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He could be wandering around looking for that building. Walter, where was the building in relation to the exit?"

Odle was pulling off his gloves. "I'll show you."

As we drove, Odle reminisced in the backseat. "Good old Martin. He was the guy who organized all the office birthday parties and the going-away parties. I always thought he did it because he didn't have any family, so he'd adopted the whole office. I never heard him talk about any sister.

"You know, I actually thought of Martin last week right after the attacks. I figured an old war-horse like him would be chafing to be back in uniform kicking butt. I felt like kicking some butt myself, and I was never in the service.

"Turn right up here and look for a place to park."

Parking was easy. The turnpike exit was squeezed on all sides by commercial properties and their parking lots, none of them full. The business closest to Consolidated's former location was a Holiday Inn, so we started there, showing Kolczak's picture around as we had on Randolph Street.

After that, Moira worked the tollbooths while Odle and I scrambled around on the stony ground beneath the elevated ramp that carried traffic between the turnpike and the exit. We found evidence of human habitation under there in the form of flattened cardboard packing cases and cold fire pits, but it predated Kolczak's disappearance. There was no one around to question.

Next we worked a little strip mall across from the exit. Moira did most of the talking, which left my mind free to think about the lunch I wasn't having. Eventually, though, it got thinking about something Odle had said in the car.

I asked him about it outside a discount shoe store. "Did you say that Kolczak had been in the service?"

"Right. During the big one, World War Two. He was in the Marines. Talked about it all the time. Saw action somewhere in the South Pacific. Tarawa, I think."

I turned to Moira, but she was too quick on her feet to need the dots connected for her. "Owen, didn't Irene tell us that Martin worked in a defense plant during the war?"

"No way," Odle said. "He signed up the day after Pearl Harbor. Didn't get out until after they dropped the Bomb."

"What does that mean, Owen?"

Another part of my technique as an investigator was to resolve all discrepancies, no matter how trivial or peripheral they seemed.

"It means we talk to Irene Kolczak again."

7.

The caregiver wasn't thrilled to see us back on her doorstep, though she was gracious to Odle. The attention she showed him

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was largely due, I decided, to his faithfulness with the Christmas cards. Moira, as usual, was in charge of the conversation. Before the discreet neighbor lady could pad off to the kitchen in search of the coffee that never seemed to arrive, Moira had asked if there'd been any word from the command center. Irene shook her head, and Moira moved us on to new business, meaning me.

"Ms. Kolczak," I began, "you told us your brother worked in a defense plant in Union. When was that exactly?"

She did her blinking bit again. "When? During the war. All through the war. Martin moved us there in nineteen forty-one. We'd always lived here in Carteret, but he wanted us with him in Union, my mother and me. He worked at the plant from nineteen forty-one until V-J Day. Then he moved back here."

"But you and your mother stayed on in Union?" Moira asked.

"Martin thought that was best," Irene said. For the first time, I heard some serious bitterness in her voice. "Mother had had the first of her strokes. Martin didn't think she could get used to a new house."

Odle was struggling to catch up, but he was polite about it. "So your brother was never in the Marines?"

"Martin? No. What made you . . . Did he tell you he'd been in the war?"

Odle looked to Moira and then to me before saying, "He might have given me that impression."

"Why would he do that, Ms. Kolczak?" I asked.

Her eyes wouldn't meet mine. "He might have wished he had been. But he got an exemption from the draft so he could take care of my mother and me."

Odle was shaking his head. "And here I was thinking of him marching into some recruiting office last week, an eighty-year-old veteran volunteering to fight the terrorists. And all the time he'd made up his big war record. He'd just been pretending to be the man he wished he had been."

"What, Owen?" Moira asked. She'd noticed my vacant expression.

"Suppose that's exactly what he did last Friday."

"Did what?"

"Tried to enlist. You said an Alzheimer's victim might wander off to fulfill a commitment, maybe one that's years out of date. Suppose Martin couldn't make sense of the terrorist attack because of his disease, but it reawakened some emotional memory of another time this country was attacked."

"December seventh, nineteen forty-one," Odle said.

"Right," I said. "Martin didn't march down to a recruiting office then, and he regretted it the rest of his life. In fact, he spent a large part of that life pretending he had enlisted. Now suddenly

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he's back in nineteen forty-one emotionally. And he has a chance to right that old mistake."

I'd lost Odle. "Don't you think a recruiting office would have reported an eighty-year-old disoriented guy who showed up talking about whipping the Axis?" he demanded. But then, he was new to the team and our methods.

Moira wasn't. "He wouldn't have gone to a two thousand one recruiting office. He would have gone to a nineteen forty-one recruiting office. Irene, do you remember where the local recruiting office was in nineteen forty-one?"

"No," the old woman said. "Who would remember that?"

"I think I know someone who might," I said.

My hunch took Moira and Odle and me back to Randolph Street, to the house of the old man in the undershirt who'd told me to get lost. His name, according to the label on his mailbox, was Balerno, and he was still dressed in his Sunday casual attire. He wasn't pleased to see Moira and me again, and he was plain mystified by Odle's presence.

"What the hell?" he asked.

"Hi there," Odle said back, giving a little wave.

I said, "Mr. Balerno, we're still looking for Martin Kolczak, the Alzheimer's patient who wandered off. We think he might be so confused that he's mixing up the terrorist attack and Pearl Harbor. We think he might even have tried to find a Marine recruiting office. We need to know where the local one was located in nineteen forty-one."

"What makes you think I can tell you that?"

I pointed to the little faded banner with the two mismatched stars that hung in the window beside the front door. "You're a World War Two veteran, aren't you? That's the kind of banner families hung in their windows back then when they had someone in the service. Your family had two servicemen, and one of them didn't come back, so his star is gold."

"My brother Sammy," Balerno said. "North Africa."

He had eyes that were barely visible between craggy brows above and bags below, making me think of flowers trying to fight their way through cracks in old concrete. Flowers because they were blue eyes, almost as bright as Moira's, and gleaming a little now.

"I don't know why I dug that banner out of the drawer last week when I was putting up the flags. Just seemed right. Maybe I was back in nineteen forty-one myself. So I can't laugh off this crazy idea of yours. What did you say the wacko's name is?"

I told him.

"Kolczak. He have a sister? Name of Irene?"

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"Yes," Moira said.

"Let me get a shirt on. I'll be right back."

8.

The Hyundai was noticeably less peppy with four of us squeezed inside it. Balerno's directions took us back the way we'd come, toward Dewey and then on past it. The latest addition to our troupe showed his age as he guided us. He had a tendency to cite landmarks that were no longer there, as when he told Moira to park near a now nonexistent bakery at the corner of Washington and Atlantic.

"The recruiting office was right next-door," Balerno said. "I remember the Dutchman who ran the bakery bringing out hot rolls and coffee to the guys waiting to sign up. Best rolls I ever had."

He looked as though he could still taste them. I almost could myself; we were that far past my lunchtime.

Though the bakery had been torn down to make way for a windowless pharmacy, the building that had housed the recruiting office was still there. It was a storefront with an old cast-iron facade whose fluted columns were rusting their way through a century of paint. The most recent occupant had been a beauty parlor, but it had folded back when Moira was in high school.

Balerno wiped at one grimy window while Odle tested the locked door. "Martin didn't get in here," the latter said.

We fell back on canvassing then, Balerno and I working one side of the street while Odle and Moira took the other. Half an hour into it, I heard my name being shouted and saw Odle waving to us. He was outside a Chinese restaurant.

Moira was inside. She'd been ordering fried rice to go when the young man behind the counter had noticed the picture of Kolczak she was carrying and mentioned that he'd seen him.

"Tell him, Francis," Moira said to her new old friend.

Francis, a smiling young man in a Hawaiian shirt, was happy to repeat the story for me. "It was Friday evening. I was coming in to work the dinner shift. I saw this old guy tottering along Roosevelt Avenue headed west." He pointed to the photocopied likeness again. "That's the guy, I'm sure of it. I remember wondering where he was going all by himself."

We all stood there wondering about that, the four of us and Francis, crowded in the restaurant's little red and black waiting area.

Balerno said, "He was headed out toward my neighborhood. It's west on Roosevelt."

Moira actually jumped. "So is Union. It's west of Carteret."

"Northwest," Balerno grumbled.

"But if you were driving there," Odle cut in, "you'd go west on Roosevelt and pick up something else, Highway 27, maybe, to take you north out of Rahway."

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"He was heading to Union," Moira said. "He was trying to go back to work at that defense plant."

"You've got it!" Odle all but banged her on the back. "Where's a phone? We've got to move the search."

"What defense plant?" Balerno demanded.

Odle and Moira were near to dancing. He said, "The one where Martin spent the war years. We just have to find out where that was."

"Maybe Irene could tell us," Balerno said, warming to the idea.

"Right," Moira said. "We have to go back to Dewey Avenue."

Francis would have come with us if he hadn't had to watch the counter. As it was, he insisted on us each taking away a carton of fried rice, no charge.

I had mine safely tucked away before we'd driven the block and a half to the Kolczak house. The rice was my compensation for having been demoted from head idea man by our overall commander, Moira. She and Odle had the thing all worked out by the time a not-too-shocked Irene Kolczak admitted us for the third time. That is, she wasn't shocked to have Moira and Odle and me turn up again. Balerno was a surprise, but not, I thought, an unpleasant one.

"Ronnie," she said. "It is Ronnie, isn't it? Ronnie Balerno?"

"It sure is, Irene," Balerno said.

The sister had company, as usual, but this time it wasn't the shy neighbor lady. It was Betty, the volunteer who had given us our original assignment.

"There you are," she said to Moira and me. "I've been waiting for you to call in. I just stopped by to tell Irene that we've heard from all the other teams and that none of them found any trace of Martin. How did you know I'd be here? Have you found something?"

Bringing Betty up to date with as much extraneous detail as possible was a job Moira could really sink her teeth into. And did. I sat in a quiet corner, feeling discontented with the turn events had taken and wondering if the feeling had any basis other than jealousy.

Meanwhile, my partner had reached her peroration. "We need to send the volunteers over to Union. That's where we'll find Martin."

"But the volunteers were all released as soon as they reported in," Betty said.

"It's just us, then," Odle said, not sounding altogether unhappy about it. He'd be making up a team name for us next. Team Kolczak, maybe.

"Do you remember where this defense plant was?" Balerno asked Irene from his place of honor beside her on the sofa.

"It was on Stuyvesant Avenue," she said. "I think I could find it again."

"We'll need another car," Moira said.

Betty volunteered hers, and everyone started stirring. It was my

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last chance to object, and I took it.

"I don't think Martin was headed to the defense plant when Francis saw him."

"Why not?" Moira asked, showing her opinion of my opinion by not resuming her seat.

"We have to be thinking in terms of an unfulfilled commitment, something undone that would have nagged at Martin all these years. Like the military service he never did. His work at the defense plant doesn't fit that pattern. That was a job he took on and finished. We should be thinking about something he didn't finish, a promise he made and didn't keep."

All eyes turned to Irene. She wouldn't return anyone's gaze, not even Balerno's. I was sure then that there was an answer and that Irene knew it. I thought I might know it, too.

"Irene, you told us that Martin got a draft deferment so he could take care of you and your mother. Did he have to do that? Did you two depend on him?"

Speaking very slowly, Irene said, "My mother had a job before we moved to Union. She'd had to find one after my father died. I was still in school."

"And then, after the war, your mother had her first stroke. You were taking care of her alone because your brother had moved back here."

"Yes," Irene said. "Martin went to night school during the war. That got him a good job with Consolidated. He sent us money."

"But he didn't move you and your mother back."

"No."

"How long did your mother live?"

"The last stroke took her in nineteen seventy-two."

"And you cared for her all that time?"

"Yes."

"How much help was your brother? What did he do besides sending money?"

Irene answered me with a single tear that rocketed down her flat, hard face.

Balerno saw the suicide tear and didn't like it. "What are you getting at with this?"

"Martin Kolczak made a commitment to take care of his mother. He used it as a way to dodge the draft. When the war was over, he turned his back on that promise. He left Irene to care for their mother, and he came back here to restart his life. That broken promise may have eaten at him all these years. When the terrorist attacks brought back the feelings of nineteen forty-one, that unfulfilled commitment to his mother may be what Martin remembered."

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Moira showed true executive ability then. "No problem, Owen. We can hit both places, the defense plant and the Kolczaks' old place in Union. Is the house still there, Irene?"

Irene thought it was.

"Good. We'll stop there first. You'd better ride with me, Irene."

That meant the very attentive Balerno would be riding with her, too. Odle and I were relegated to Betty's minivan, with me in the first of its two backseats.

That was appropriate, since I was still feeling as though I'd moved to the backseat of the investigation. No one had taken my latest epiphany very seriously. I wasn't entirely satisfied with it myself. I spent the first part of the drive west on Roosevelt wondering whether I'd leapt too far or fallen short.

As I tuned out their conversation, Betty was telling Odle that she was a nurse specializing in the care of the elderly and that she'd just been trying to convince Irene it was time to consider a nursing home for her brother. When I checked in on them again, she was thanking Odle for getting involved.

He made light of it. "I've gotten more help than I've given today, believe me. All week I've been looking for some little job I could be doing to take my mind off things. Nothing's worked very long, except this hunt for old Martin. It could go on all night, and it'd be fine with me."

From there they fell into discussing whether the healing process could already have begun, less than a full week after the tragedy. I stuck with Odle's prior observation, thinking that the search for Martin Kolczak had certainly made me feel better. Even the monotonous business of knocking on doors and showing his picture had helped.

And suddenly I knew that I hadn't leapt far enough back in the Kolczaks' little living room.

I grabbed Betty's shoulder. "Flash your lights. Get them to pull over."

It took a combination of lights, horn, and Odle waving out the window before the Hyundai finally pulled into a Hess station. I figured out how the van's sliding door worked and called back over my shoulder, "Follow us."

Balerno and I made quite a load in the little import's backseat. He and Moira were both looking at me expectantly. Irene's expression had an element of dread in it, but then I had a history of asking her uncomfortable questions. My latest was a softball: "Where is your mother buried?"

"St. Gertrude's Cemetery. In Rahway."

The town where we currently sat. "Have we passed it yet?"

"No. It's just up the road."

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"Show us."

Moira was waiting for an explanation. I gave her an excuse. "It's on our way."

I'd often observed one characteristic of urban New Jersey cemeteries, which was that they were tightly packed. Always before I'd thought of it as a final indignity, a final gyp: People who'd been forced to live their lives jammed shoulder to shoulder with strangers now had to face eternity in the same crush. On this particular Sunday, I had a different reaction. It might have been due to the week we'd all struggled through or the age I'd reached, but as our little procession entered St. Gertrude's, I felt the people buried there were lucky to have the company. The community.

The place was huge and hilly and not without the occasional very mature tree. Irene's formerly sure directions became tentative and inaccurate. She got a little defensive about it, too, as though we'd condemn her for not being a regular visitor, this woman who'd spent her life waiting on others. I was about to say something to her when Balerno pronounced absolution by simply reaching out and patting her arm.

She settled down then and led us right to the grave, or as close to it as the cars could get. We trooped down a gentle slope on foot, the six of us, all scanning the place for Martin. Other than Team Kolczak, there were only a few people about. None of them was the man we were after, which caused some grumbling in the ranks.

"What are we doing here anyway?" Balerno asked when we'd reached the Kolczak plot. He was reacting to another of Irene's stingy tears, which had been squeezed out of her by the sight of the old upright headstone. On it were the names of Irene's mother, Marie, and her barely mentioned father, Gregory, who'd died in 1939.

My unspoken answer to Balerno's question was that we were there because Odle's soliloquy about finding some small thing to do to take his mind off the death and suffering across the bay had redirected my thinking. I still believed that Kolczak's unfulfilled obligation, the broken promise that he'd left his home to make right, involved his neglected mother. But I no longer saw Kolczak's solution in terms of some dramatic recreation of the past. I was thinking now of some simple act. Like tending a grave.

The Kolczak plot had certainly been tended by someone. I stooped down to examine it, noting that the grass had been pulled up for an inch or two around the base of the headstone. The grass that covered the grave was as even as if it had been mowed that morning. The stone itself had been brushed. A little greasy soot remained in some of the smaller crevices, but the face and the larger letters and numbers were very clean.

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"Martin's been here," I said. "This grave's been cleaned up recently."

"You're nuts," Balerno said. He was standing on the plot to my left. "This one over here's just as neat."

"So's this one," Odle said from my right. "It's funny, when we first drove in, I was looking over the graves and thinking they didn't get much maintenance. But back here it's great."

Moira and I exchanged glances. "Owen. You don't think—"

"I do. You go back up the slope and I'll go down." Balerno and Odle had gotten the idea and were moving off in their opposite directions. I called after them, "Find the first untended grave."

Betty and Irene stood near the Kolczak stone, watching as the four of us moved slowly away, our steps tracing an invisible cross that grew larger and larger. I'd examined six graves, all as neat as the first, when I heard Odle cry out.

He'd worked faster than I had, getting all the way into a new section of graves whose stones were set perpendicular to the Kolczaks' row. When we reached the spot where Odle stood crying, we found an old man sprawled on the grass, his head against a slab of polished pink granite.

His clothes were grass- and sweat-stained, his hands dark with dirt and dried blood, especially around what was left of his nails. Where he'd brushed his wispy hair away from his eyes as he'd worked, his face was also the reddish brown of the soil. Everywhere else it was an unnatural white, the color of the bone that was so pronounced beneath the wasted skin.

I'd been carrying his picture around all day, and I still had trouble recognizing the man as Martin Kolczak. I might not have recognized him, in fact, without the testimony of his sister's tears, which now flowed freely.

10.

Odle tried to find Kolczak's pulse and failed. I tried and failed in turn. It took Betty, the medical professional, to detect the fluttery rhythm. By then Moira had phoned for an ambulance and Odle had retrieved the afghan Betty kept on her van's third seat. He and I used it to cover Martin to his chin. Our long afternoon was giving way to evening, and the air was getting cool.

As soon as Balerno had gotten Irene calmed down, Betty and Odle started in on the subject of nursing-home care for her brother. The unanswerable argument was lying before her under the rainbow-colored spread, and Balerno was crooning in her ear about having a life of her own, but still Irene hesitated. The pull of her old life, her only life, was that strong.

I left them to it and climbed the slope to where Moira was waiting to guide the emergency medical technicians. I found her in a

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narrow patch of sunlight between long shadows cast by the stones and the trees. Her face was turned toward the sun and her eyes were closed, but she somehow identified the sound of my step.

"Owen, is that you?" she asked without opening her eyes. "Can you feel the sun on your face? There's still the tiniest bit of warmth in it."

"I feel it."

"Last Wednesday I was outside somewhere and I felt the sun on my face; remember how beautiful the weather was? I was just standing there soaking it in and suddenly I felt so guilty. I mean, all those people buried under the rubble of those towers, and there I was getting off on the feeling of sunlight on my face.

"And then I thought, 'No. I'm not going to feel bad about this. And I'm not going to stay out of the sun because none of those people will ever feel the sun again. That's just the opposite of what I should do. Because those people can't, I'm going to hold my face to the sun every chance I get. And every time I do it, I'm going to remember them.'"

"That's a good idea," I said.

Her eyes snapped open then, catching me smiling at her. But she didn't call me on it. "How many graves do you think he cleaned?" she asked instead.

"I don't know."

"I've been doing a little calculating. Based on how far the four of us got from that central grave and how squeezed together they are, he might have cleaned a hundred. That's an unbelievable number, even when you divide it by the two days he was missing."

"Then don't divide it by two days," I said. "Divide it by the thirty years he spent avoiding this place."

"Damn," she said. "It makes you wonder what penances we're all putting ourselves through without realizing we're doing it."

For some reason that thought carried her to the subject of my career. "Now that I've gotten to know you, I'm having a hard time picturing you at a Home Depot. What's that all about?"

"I happen to look good in orange," I said.

The alternating notes of a siren sounded in the distance.

"That's it, then," Moira said. "It's over. Tomorrow we go back to whatever stupid thing we were doing with our lives. You go back to explaining the difference between Phillips-head screws and regular screws, and I go back to deciding whether next spring's Capri pants should have cuffs or slits."

"Definitely slits," I said.

"I'm serious, Owen. How can we go back to that? Why should we?"

I turned my face toward the last of the sunlight. "Because they can't."

Moira nodded, and we shook on it. ●

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The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter

by Robert Barnard

"Ah!" said Mr. Septimus Coram, surveying the large plate of eggs, bacon, pork sausages, tomatoes, mushrooms, and—his particular favourite—blood pudding. "Gives you an appetite, my job, that nobody can deny."

It was something he said on all such occasions, accompanying it with a deep swig from the pewter beer mug that he always used at such late breakfasts.

"Brute!" mouthed his daughter Esther. It was something *she* said on all such occasions, but only silently.

"He went quiet, did he?" asked his wife. It wasn't that she wanted to know, merely that the neighbours would ask.

"Didn't have no option. One brawny warder on one side of him, and another brawny warder on the other side. Not that I couldn't have coped on my own if need be."

Mr. Coram had all his life been wiry rather than heavy in frame, though a lifetime's addiction to massive fried meals and beer had given him an unattractive potbelly. His droopy moustache, pince-nez spectacles, and protruding ears produced a facial effect that was far from alluring.

"People like to know," murmured his wife.

"Don't I know it! And haven't I had hundreds of good pints on the strength of it. He went quiet—more depressed than anything

Robert Barnard's latest non-series novel, *A Cry From the Dark* (Scribner), was released in the U.S. in February 2004. *Booklist* called it, "A taut and elegantly pitched mystery, from a master's hand." Mr. Barnard was formally recognized as a master of the genre last year when he was awarded the British Crime Writers' Association's Diamond Dagger for Lifetime Achievement. His awards and nominations from U.S. organizations are numerous. †

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else. None of this shouting that he was innocent all the way, though they say he was protesting it even as they served him his breakfast. Innocent!"

He laughed heartily and speared a sausage.

"They said at the trial there was doubt," said his wife.

"Said at the trial!" said her husband contemptuously, but not interrupting his chewing. "*Who* said it at the trial? The counsel for the bleeding Defence, that's who said it. It's his job. Beats me why they bother with one. No one believes a word they say. The police don't make mistakes, and Her Majesty Queen Victoria's judiciary don't make them, either. *Innocent?* Innocent men don't get hanged. And you can take that from me, who knows."

"Fool!" mouthed his daughter, looking at her father closely as he finished the first tomato and sliced into the second.

"Well, I'll be off to the shops," said Mrs. Coram. "And I'll go along to see Bessy Rowlands afterwards. She's poorly."

"Suit yourself," said her husband. "I'll be having a kip. But mind you're back to cook me my dinner."

Since Mary Coram had cooked her husband his dinner every day of her married life except the day they went to Brighton and the day Esther had been born (and *hadn't* he sworn on that occasion!), Mrs. Coram didn't feel any need to reply. As she banged the front door that led directly from the Corams' parlour onto the street, Septimus put down his knife and fork.

"A meal like that crowns the day, puts a seal on a job well done," he said. His daughter merely gave a sceptical grunt. "It's like God giving me a nice pat on the back."

"Must be nice to think that God takes such a special interest in you," said Esther Coram. Her father stared at her suspiciously, but decided to ignore the note of satire in her voice.

"It is, my girl. But it's nothing to be surprised at. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and I will repay.' I'm the instrument of the Lord's wrath with evildoers. It's natural He should take a special interest."

"I see. And He would protect the innocent, to prevent any possible wrong being done?"

"Of course He would. But He doesn't need to in this country. We have our constitution and our free judiciary to protect the innocent."

"And so if the courts say a man killed his wife, he killed her?"

"Still harping on about handsome Mr. Critchley? Didn't look so handsome after the drop." He chuckled. "Yes—the court said he done it, and he did."

"In spite of the lack of evidence?"

"Lack of evidence? The man works in a chemist's. She dies of arsenical poisoning. It stands to reason."

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"I'd have thought it stood to reason that if a worker in a chemist's wanted to kill his wife he wouldn't use poison."

Mr. Coram's disgust was manifest.

"That's the trouble with you, my girl. Too clever by half. The man had a girlfriend in the background to boot."

"Name unknown, nature of relationship unknown."

"He was loyal to her, I'll give him that."

"And there was someone in the wife's life as well. Also identity unknown."

"She wasn't in a position to tell us who it was, was she?" Septimus Coram added, "Poor cow!" without a trace of compassion.

"She didn't sound like a very pleasant person to me."

"A very pleasant person!" said Septimus, imitating her fastidious distaste. "You'd believe anything the Defence told you, wouldn't you? Even if it was that the moon was made of blue cheese. What he said about the wife was just what Evan Critchley told *him:* that she made his life miserable by nagging. Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?"

"Not necessarily, if his defence was that he hadn't done it."

"Hmm. Just trying to get the sympathy vote when he was found guilty. . . . Ooh, that breakfast's sitting heavy."

"That's the trouble with good food, isn't it, Dad? It has that built-in disadvantage."

Coram's only response was another "Ooh!"

"So the situation was this, then: Evan Critchley had got a girlfriend, and in order to marry her he needed to be rid of his wife, divorce being too expensive for the likes of him and us."

"Quite right, too. Where would this country be if every Tom, Dick, and Harry—not to say Henrietta—could get a divorce at the click of a finger? Morality would fly out the window."

"And his wife, meanwhile—in the name of morality, no doubt—was enjoying a flirtation, or something stronger than that."

"We don't know, do we? We just know that's what your Mr. Critchley said."

"There was a neighbour said she was often away from home for long periods during the day."

"Yah! What does that amount to? There were no kiddies for her to look after. Why don't you mention the neighbour who said she talked of having bad stomach pains in the last weeks of her life?"

A grimace of agony passed over his face, and he let out another heartfelt groan.

"Not surprising she complained of pain. She was being poisoned, wasn't she? No one denies that. The question is, who was slipping her the arsenic?"

"Well, who more likely than her hubby?"

"That could be what the murderer banked on: that the police

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would settle on the obvious solution and the easiest suspect, and not look any further."

"Well, why should they, when young Evan Critchley had the means, the opportunity, and the motive?"

"But what the police hadn't got was *evidence.*"

"They had enough for the judge, enough for the jury."

"The jury! People who believe what they read in the *Daily Mail* every day," said his daughter contemptuously.

"And why shouldn't they read the *Mail?* It brings to light a lot of scandalous goings-on that oughtn't to be hid."

"With about as much evidence as the Prosecution had in this case. If Isabella Critchley was being fed arsenic, why shouldn't it be by the lover who's tired of her?"

Mr. Coram's eyes popped out with simulated outrage.

"Hark at her! A daughter of mine, sitting calmly in the parlour talking of women with lovers! A girl who goes out to work scrubbing floors instead of looking for a husband who'll give her a good home! Next thing you know, she'll be wanting to train as a doctor or a solicitor!"

"I'd aim higher than a solicitor," said Esther stoutly. "Nothing less than a lawyer for me. And why not? It'll come in time, and better sooner than later."

"A woman's mind's not suited to logic and reason. It's all emotion. Look at you: You start by demanding evidence, then you make accusations against this woman's lover with not a shred of evidence—no evidence, in fact, that there was one."

"Oh, there was a lover," said Esther Coram quietly. Her father's attention was distracted by a tremendous upheaval in his stomach. When it had settled down he looked at his daughter suspiciously.

"What do you know about her lover?"

"I know there was one."

"How would *you* know?" he jeered.

Esther said quietly: "I have a life beyond this prison of a house." Her father made a feeble gesture, threatening her, but it petered out. "You say I go out cleaning. In fact, I act as cook and lady's maid in the house where I work. I am in a position of trust. Almost a companion."

"Almost a companion!" he sneered. A thought struck him. "Why are you telling me this? Who is this woman who employs you? Was she his mistress? Or was she the wife of Mrs. Critchley's lover? You imply there was a connection with the lover."

Esther thought before she spoke.

"Mrs. Critchley visited there. I overheard things."

"No doubt!" he hectored her. "You, in a position of trust, *would*

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hear things—by accident, of course. And I suppose you never passed them on to the police."

"No, I never passed them on to the police. Mrs. Critchley was a woman I greatly disliked: rude, offhand, a real little dictator when she felt like it."

"So it was all right to murder her?"

"It was understandable. . . . She and my mistress had known each other very well in the past." Her father grunted. "Very well indeed."

"What's up with the girl?" Septimus demanded of the far wall. "Speaks in riddles."

"My mistress's secrets were Mrs. Critchley's secrets. She could have done her a lot of harm."

"Hmm," said Septimus sceptically.

"My mistress is prominent in the suffragette movement. She could have ruined her, and ruined the movement."

"More power to her—oh! OH!—to her elbow then."

"So you see," said Esther, relaxing momentarily, "there's more than one suspect. And blackmailers don't normally have just one iron in the fire. There could have been people all over London whom Isabella knew dangerous things about."

"What are you saying? That she was a madam? A brothel keeper? If she was, the police would have known."

"I'm sure they would. Very interested in brothels, the police. Either they want to use them or to shut them down."

"Wash your mouth out, girl. Police wouldn't—"

"Police are men, just like soldiers and sailors. But I'm not saying she was a brothel keeper. She was a blackmailer. How she got her secrets doesn't concern you. I do know that my mistress was going to go to see her, to offer her a big payment to make an end of it."

"Are you accusing her of murder?"

"I'm saying that a police force that knew what it was doing would have made her a suspect. But there's this difficulty about blackmailers: They're not looking for a quick fortune. They're looking for an income."

"You're right there, for once, girl."

"A steady drip of money's what they find useful. And that suits their sense of power, too: They love nothing so much as having someone in their power, gradually turning the screw. In any case, there was nothing that Mrs. Critchley could hand over to my mistress and say: 'There's an end of it.' She didn't have any *thing*. What she had was knowledge. In her brain. And dying with her."

She was interrupted by a great roar from her father.

"Doctor! Get a doctor!"

Esther remained as composed as a steel girder.

"A doctor, Dad? Not for a spot of indigestion, surely."

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"This isn't indi—" He sat forward in his seat, clutching his stomach.

"Have you realised that at last?" said Esther. "No, it isn't indigestion. I'll tell you what it is, Dad. It's hyoscine, in your beer. You've been having small quantities for quite a while now. It all mounts up. I found out about it by reading all the stuff in the newspapers about the trial of Mr. Critchley. They went mad about poisons, and I didn't think I should use the same thing. So here I am, you see, one more suspect: I could have read up about poison months ago. I could have decided to do my mistress a service and kill her tormentor for her."

Again the groan, again the heaving sounds from the stomach, again the plea: "A doctor!"

"Oh no, Dad," said Esther, shaking her head. "I'm going out, but not to fetch a doctor. I'm walking out of this room, locking the door, and I'm going to put this place behind me. See that bag behind the sofa? That contains everything I want to keep from my old life. Not much, is it?"

An expletive came from the floor, as Septimus slid down ungracefully from his chair. Esther stood up.

"I'm going to go now and fetch Mum from Bessy Rowlands'. I'm going to take her up to the West End, show her the sights, treat her to a meal at Lyons. I'll tell her I left your meal ready. And while we're eating I'll tell her I'm going to live with my mistress. And that's true, too. We're starting a new life in Manchester. That's one of the centres of the suffragette movement. So today is an end for you, and an end for me here. I'll be better off with my mistress." She knelt down and hissed into his ear: "That's what she is, Dad. My mistress. My lover." There was an outraged grunt, and some slurred word that sounded like "impossible." She shook her head. "Oh no, it's not impossible, Dad. That's what Mrs. Critchley held over her—and over some other prominent women. They'd been lovers years before. Oh, there should have been a lot of suspects in the Isabella Critchley murder case, Dad. The police picked on the one nearest to hand, and you've just hanged him."

Again the strangled syllables, words that sounded like "right man."

She knelt down and whispered straight into his protuberant ear.

"Oh no, you didn't hang the right man, Dad. I killed her myself. Not because I was involved with her husband. Men don't attract me. Not as a service to my mistress, though I'm fond of her, and was glad to be of help. I killed her because I'm your daughter. There is something in me that wants to kill, and gets pleasure from killing when the time comes. It's in the blood, Dad. I have an appetite for killing. I get it from you."

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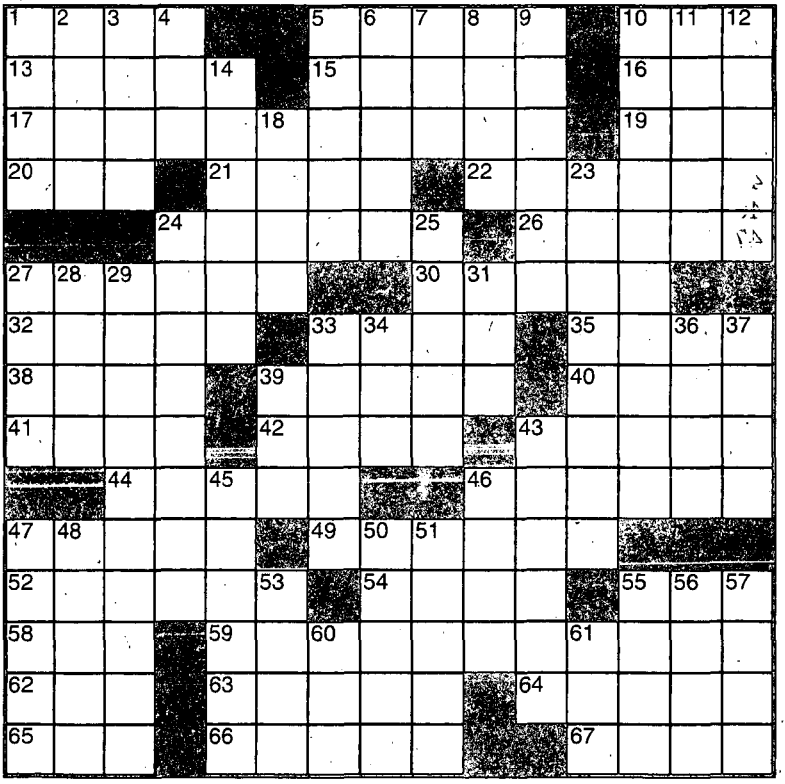
Heavy Justice

by Gene Bodnar



Solution on page 121

ACROSS

1. Dole out
5. Barton of the American Red Cross
10. Shoot the breeze
13. Bitter to the taste
15. Variety of tea
16. Under the weather
17. "Fat" sleuth
19. Buck's mate
20. The sun
21. First word in a fairy tale
22. Flemish painter Peter
24. "Stout" inspector
26. Succulent plants

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27. Trap by surprise
30. Acrylic fiber
32. Web-footed honkers
33. Upholstered couch
35. Switch positions
38. Playwright Moss
39. Sleuth who weighs "one-seventh of a ton"
40. Sandwich shop, for short
41. One against
42. Brother to Louie and Dewey
43. Kitchen floor nine-to-fiver
44. Serf owned by a feudal lord
46. Lobster's pincers
47. Lower in esteem
49. "Bulky" inspector
52. Plant secretion attractive to bees
54. Bulblike stem, as of a crocus
55. Fish eggs
58. Judge Lance of a '95 murder trial
59. "Dumpling-faced" sleuth
62. Zodiac sign
63. Fred's wife on *I Love Lucy*
64. Auditory sensation
65. Building wing
66. Property documents
67. Harry Truman's wife

DOWN

1. Rubberized raincoats, for short
2. Reverberate
3. River duck
4. Make a mistake
5. Verify, as an alibi
6. High school
7. Cigar residue
8. Bellow like a lion
9. Like a yearbook
10. Sleuth who "stopped counting at 250 pounds"
11. Isolated from others
12. Consecrate
14. Top worn by women
18. Advance slowly
23. Like the snow in a Hilda Lawrence novel
24. Most bosomy
25. Carmelized sugar cooled in sheets
27. Ottoman Empire official
28. Lowdown and dirty
29. Sleuth who was "a big 200" but managed to diet
31. Actress Charlotte
33. Dixieland
34. Bullfighting cheer
36. Dog's nemesis
37. Titles for male aristocrats
39. Reporter's question
43. _____ a ride (hitchhikes)
45. Turned over pages of a book
46. *The Judas Window* author
47. Old-womanish
48. Kind of tropical palm
50. Felt pain
51. Christmas carols
53. Charge per unit
55. Dissolute man
56. Has possession
57. Ceases
60. Smokey-Bear tie
61. Stick up at gunpoint

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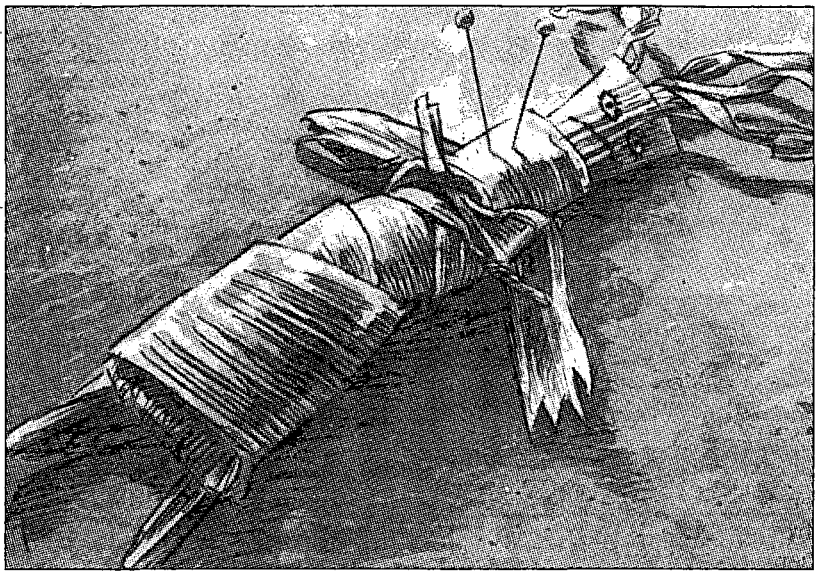

Art by Ron Bucalo

THE LAST SHEAF

by Amy Myers

"I told her not to cut the last sheaf, Parson, but she would do it. You know my Eleanor."

Indeed I did. Neck Farm might belong in law to Mr. Richard Wright, who paced so agitatedly around my study, but his wife had brought it to him as dowry. In her own mind at least, she is the owner, and as her mind is of fearsome strength, she rules the farm with an iron fist, causing as much affray in our village of Cuckoo Lees as does this new whirlwind in Parliament, Mr. Pitt. Were Eleanor at the head of our armies in this war with the American colonies they would be well advised to yield forthwith.

"There'll be trouble," Richard continued, "so I'd like you to be at the Harvest Supper, Parson."

Now trouble is something I take care to avoid. Sufficient comes of its own accord without our seeking more. "The parish constable might be preferable," I suggested mildly.

"There'll be my best mutton at top table. And some of those Frenchified dishes Eleanor insists on."

Perhaps he thought this might tempt me, but my dear house-

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keeper Dorcas's dinner still lay contentedly in my stomach, and her hint that supper might include a Quaking Pudding echoed even more comfortably in my mind.

He must have read my expression correctly. "And Miss Evelina comes, too."

I was won. If the squire's daughter was to attend, how delightful an evening it would be—for me, at least. As Richard related the whole unhappy story of the afternoon's events, however, I doubted if even my presence would deter the labourers from giving vent to far different sentiments from those usually expressed in the joyful, if raucous, celebrations after Harvest Home. Continuously flowing ale and cider are more apt to deepen hatred than lull it into tolerance.

Most of Amy Myers's stories for *EQMM* feature her series sleuth Auguste Didier, a Victorian chef turned amateur detective. Didier may soon be the subject of a movie, for after attending screenwriter Robert McKee's seminar on writing for the big screen, Ms. Myers decided to set to work on her first screenplay—about Didier, of course. Though the following story is historical, it is one of the author's non-series tales. ¶

The cutting of the last sheaf in the corn harvest is a ceremony usually performed by all the labourers together, since it is believed that ill luck will fall upon the man that does it alone. England as it was before Christianity reached it is now a time out of mind, as is its religion. Long ago, the Corn Spirit was thought to dwell within the last sheaf; he who cut it destroyed the fertility of the ground and must therefore die at the hands of his fellow workers. Memories of that old religion have long since faded, but unease lingers longer in men's minds.

For the master of a farm to enter the field at all at Harvest Home was ill-advised; for a woman to carry out that role was blind stupidity; to insist on cutting the last sheaf was madness. Eleanor Wright had compounded her folly by informing the labourers who had remonstrated with her, two brothers, that the services of one would not be needed after the day was out and the other that he should no longer be head ploughman but underploughman at a lower wage. Moreover, the rate of wages for all labourers would next year be cut, owing to the low price of grain in the market.

Even the presence of Miss Evelina suddenly seemed to me insufficient for the storm that might lie ahead. True, the gentry at top table would be under no physical threat, but I feared for the squire's daughter. She is but young, and I would have her believe while she yet may that quaint old village customs are all roses on maypoles and good cheer at Christmas. In time she will realise that these had been paid for in blood.

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Neck Farm lies a mile or so from the village and Richard graciously sent his carriage for me. When it arrived, it held Dr. Meek and his wife, and I felt somewhat cheered. Dr. Meek is one of the younger generation of doctors who would turn medicine on its head, but I am prepared to be tolerant even though I believe fiercely in the old remedies. At least tonight help would be on hand if ill temper turned to bruising fisticuffs. This would be unlikely while we were present, of course, but it was the custom for the master's table to retire after the toasts and leave the labourers, their wives, and the domestic servants to their drinking, glee singing, and dancing to William Tucker's fiddle.

Richard Wright was much relieved to see me, and we gathered sociably in the farmhouse parlour.

"You honour us, Parson," Eleanor boomed at me.

I was glad I had donned my best wig, for all my misgivings as to whether the occasion warranted it. Richard Wright wore his own hair, but he is somewhat younger than I. Eleanor, however, was in fine fig herself, her hair dressed and bejewelled as though she were Queen Charlotte herself, and her gown of richest embroidered taffeta.

"The honour is mine, Mrs. Wright." I bowed low over her hand for all I was attending His Majesty's court.

Miss Evelina looked enchanting in a white gown, tied with a large blue bow; she was sweetly demure, as though I had not seen her skip and play since she was a little child; I am sure that within her heart that skipping still continues. Thus formally attired, we progressed in stately fashion through the farmyard mud to the tithe barn. Tithes to the church are seldom paid in kind nowadays, but these great barns remain. Little could be seen of the huge beams today, for they were swathed in greenery. The atmosphere was already charged, and the noise great as the harvesters awaited the mistress and her husband.

The noise was instantly hushed as we entered. I wish I could say it was out of respect, but it was followed by a swell of discontented murmuring as we took our places. I was accustomed to rousing cheers and good welcome at other farms, so this did not bode well.

"Look!" Miss Evelina cried in excitement.

Towards us, in the middle of the barn, between the long tables, marched the Lord of the Harvest, who presides over the ceremony. He was clad in the labourer's usual grey smock, but round his neck was a garland of woven corn, and on his head a crown of corn. Our eyes, however, were on what he held aloft in his arms, to present to the master—or, in this case, to the mistress. It was the corn dolly, made from the last sheaf.

Normally this is a small crude symbol, but on this occasion it

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was two feet in height, and bore straw hair dyed with henna, not unlike the colour of Mrs. Wright's hair. And the face bore a distinct resemblance to hers, within the limits of a corn effigy. The eyes bore a malevolent look that caused me to shiver, even—and I instantly prayed for forgiveness for such a thought—as though the Corn Spirit still dwelt within and would have its revenge.

"Oh, Parson Pennywick, do you see that?" Evelina whispered.

I did, and I hoped that Mrs. Wright was not so observant. Two long pins were stuck in the doll's chest, the ancient witchcraft signal of coming death. We had only a brief glimpse before the doll was whisked around and propped up on the floor against the far side of our table, facing the labourers.

"I thank you, Lord of the Harvest," Eleanor declared graciously.

Perhaps she had not seen the pins, though I could see her husband pale, even though he sat at the far end of the table from myself.

Despite this ominous beginning, the feast was delightful. I had only a passing regret for Dorcas's supper and trusted that the pudding might be served cold tomorrow. The boiled mutton and caper sauce, the Chicken à la Reine, and the magnificent Solomon's Temple made in coloured flummery were an admirable substitute, and the time was passed merrily enough. I cast only a momentary thought that Richard Wright might feel deprived of his proper position as master of the farm, but saw he was entertained by the doctor's wife, as was Eleanor by Dr. Meek.

At last arrived the time for the toasts, which I had hoped might be omitted in the present unpleasantness. It appeared not, for the Lord of the Harvest rose to his feet and banged a gong for silence.

I received a most unpleasant surprise. I had so concentrated on the corn dolly that I had failed to look closely at the Lord of the Harvest himself. Now I recognised him as one of the two brothers with whom, so Richard Wright had informed me, his wife had had the dispute that afternoon. Terence and Timothy Johnson were both decent fellows at heart, and it had grieved me that such misfortune should come to them. They were nearing thirty and were unmarried, having a widowed mother to support. The Widow Johnson took in a little laundry and supplied herbal remedies to the village, much to Dr. Meek's annoyance, but was much respected.

My earlier forebodings rushed back to me. Mistakenly, perhaps, for the Lord of the Harvest began to sing the traditional toast:

Here's a health unto our mistress
The founder of our feast
We hope her soul to God will go
When she do get her rest.

The slight pauses before "mistress" and "her" did not escape me, nor the venom in the third line, but I thought little of it in my

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relief that the usual course of events was being followed without open unpleasantness.

While he had been singing, his brother had brought six pewter tankards to our table and then the bowl of Harvest Wassail Cup. He took each tankard in its turn, filled it with a ladleful of the punch, and brought it to us one by one. I was less than grateful for mine. The cup was traditionally a lethal mixture of hot ale, spices, eggs, cream, and sugar, and was more suited for Christmas wassailing than for the end of August harvest. I sipped from mine very gingerly as the Lord of the Harvest roared out the first verse once more to end his song.

"Here's a health unto our mistress . . ."

At this point Eleanor rose to return the toast. From her first words—"I thank you, my loyal men, for the great service you have rendered our farm, and indeed *our* farm I consider it, for we all play our part"—I saw hostility written on every face, and as she drank, I shuddered to think of what might be said when we had departed that could not be spat out in our presence.

Our little procession duly (and for my part thankfully that we had escaped so lightly) made its way back through the mud. Behind us, we could hear the noise of voices, not raised in song or merrymaking, but in anger. Every now and then the sound of a fiddle was heard, as if to convince us that we were mistaken. If so, it played in vain. I glanced back through the doorway to see the corn dolly lifted high, being moved in obscene gestures, and the malevolent eyes still turned towards us. I wondered if the pins of death still remained in place.

Back in the farmhouse parlour, even Miss Evelina's high spirits seemed daunted. It is the time of year when a fire is unnecessary, but a sudden chill makes one long for its comfort.

"I believe that passed well," Eleanor observed with great satisfaction. "No expense was spared."

There was an astonished silence as Richard went to pour brandy for the gentlemen, while the ladies awaited tea. I thought Eleanor was to demand a brandy for herself, for she gave a strange cry, rose partly to her feet, stretching out a hand. But she did not. She was clearly ill, for she collapsed upon her chair once more, seemingly unable to speak and clutching her throat.

"Rhubarb," I cried instinctively, fearing she was in a faint or fever. It is my infallible remedy.

Dr. Meek, who had hurried to her side, did not act upon my recommendation, but moved Eleanor to the sofa with her husband's help, motioning me to escort an alarmed Miss Evelina and Mrs. Meek to another room. By the time I returned, having requested tea to be taken to them, I was met with the terrible news that Eleanor had died. I blamed myself for not being present to give

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her the comfort of prayer, but Dr. Meek waved this aside. As Richard seemed too stricken with shock and grief to hear me, I proposed to take the ladies home and return.

Dr. Meek looked up sharply when I suggested this. "Pray do not leave, Parson Pennywick."

"I can be of little use for the moment."

He came close to me so that Richard could not hear. "I fear all may not be well. The symptoms were extreme and rapid. Too rapid for an aversion to some natural ingredient."

"You suspect poison?" I asked, horrified. "Taken by accident at the supper?"

Even as I said this, I realised this could not be what the doctor was suggesting.

"Given to her in her food," Dr. Meek said bluntly, "whether by accident or on purpose."

"But we all helped ourselves from the same serving dishes."

"The drink, perhaps."

"Wine was poured from the same flasks." We looked at each other fearfully, as though expecting any moment to feel the cramps of death upon us.

"There was the Harvest Wassail Cup," Dr. Meek said at last.

"We all drank from that, too."

"But from different tankards."

I took his point. "And the wine from different glasses."

"What," he said, "if the pewter hid some poison? Glass would reveal it, pewter would not."

I relived the scene in my mind's eye. I saw the tankards borne to our table, I saw the wassail bowl follow. I saw the hand ladling out the thick, sticky liquid, and I saw the hand deliver a tankard to each of us at that table. What I did not see—and one of us would surely have done since we were all watching—was one of the six people at our table stretch out to put something in one of the tankards. How, after all, would we have known which tankard was going to whom? So—

"The Johnson brothers," I said heavily.

"Which one?" Dr. Meek showed no surprise as this was clearly the conclusion he too had reached.

"The one that ladled out the wassail cup."

As soon as I had said this, I saw the dilemma, one to which neither of us could supply an answer. "I'll fetch the parish constable," I told the doctor.

"Samuel Byward could not resolve this."

I was forced to agree. It would be beyond his powers, too.

I have omitted to mention earlier that Terence and Timothy are identical twins.

❖ ❖ ❖

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It is said that there is no such thing as identical twins, but if this is so, then Timothy and Terence come most remarkably close to it. With their black hair, swarthy complexion, identical features, and sturdy build, not to mention their uniform labourers' clothing of grey smock over dark breeches and stockings, I could not swear to which one had held the wassail ladle and which had worn the Lord of the Harvest's crown.

Close to them, one can sense the difference in character, Timothy being the kinder of the two and Terence the greedier though less able. No doubt their fellow labourers could tell in this way, too, for it was revealed by subtler means than sight alone. Certainly their mother knew the difference. Even had I been paying attention, however, I could not have told which one played which role this evening.

"Then the squire must send to London for the Bow Street Runners." This would be the proper course of action.

"And how shall they know, if we cannot determine which is which? Parson, I am new to the village; it is you must discover the truth, and then the squire can put him in charge for the assizes."

I realised there could be terrible consequences in inviting the Runners into our small community. Whom might they pick on—or what might they discover? Cuckoo Lees has its secrets, as do all small communities. I could see now that this was in Dr. Meek's mind, and I told him that I would quickly solve this matter.

Indeed I had every confidence that I would do so. The Lord of the Harvest would still be wearing his straw crown and garland, and it would be simple to determine which twin was which. I returned to the barn with the doctor, leaving Richard in the charge of Mrs. Meek and Miss Evelina. The barn was now lit with flickering candles and oil lamps, giving it an eerie quality. I had to bang upon the Lord of the Harvest's gong to make myself heard, and it took me but a moment to see that the crown and garland that had once adorned the Lord of the Harvest had vanished.

"Your mistress is dead," I informed them bluntly, wishing no false sorrow here. "I shall say a prayer for her soul." There was an odd silence while I did so, and then I continued: "It seems she ate or drank something that disagreed violently with her." A few mutterings at that, but it was still strangely quiet. "Only her fellow diners or the man who ladled out the wassail cup could have given her poison deliberately, and deliberate it must have been."

I was pleased at my cunning in including her fellow diners among the suspects rather than accusing the Johnson brothers outright.

"Does anyone here disagree with that? Had anyone else the opportunity?"

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A complete silence followed, then one shouted: "No, Parson, but I wish I'd've done it, that I do."

"Be quiet, Ebenezer, you old fool," his neighbour urged him. "We be talking of death, and respect is due."

Ebenezer subsided, and no one else spoke.

The two Johnson brothers sat side by side with impassive faces. Next to them was their mother, a tiny figure, clad in her widow's gown of black, and I was grieved at what I had to do. They say that twins can read each other's thoughts, and I wished I were privy to them, too, for there was nothing to suggest which of the twins had worn the crown and garland.

"The Harvest Supper must end," I told the company sadly. "Return to your homes, if you please." Then as they all rose to leave, I added, "Save you, Terence and Timothy." Their mother looked as if she would stay, but I indicated she too should leave. I watched her take her shawl from her bag and forlornly follow the rest of the assembly. I had little doubt that she would not go far while there was a threat to her precious sons.

Dr. Meek looked concerned. "But some of these men could tell us which of the brothers held the ladle. As can, no doubt, their mother."

"They will not say one word." I was sure of that. I had lived too long in Cuckoo Lees. "And their mother will not inform against her sons. But I will try." I raised my voice again as they filed out: "Any man or woman who can tell me whether Timothy or Terence bore the wassail cup this evening remain behind."

No one even cast a glance at me as they left.

Dr. Meek took a seat some way away, to make it clear that I was in charge of this investigation. I was perplexed, however, as to how I should tackle this difficult task before me. The role of quasi-magistrate is not unknown to me, or to others of the clergy, but in these circumstances I knew I had only my usual source of help to call upon, since He had the benefit of being privy to the truth.

Timothy and Terence sat before me across the table, two round healthy faces, looking so unmoved by the enormity of their situation, so sure of themselves, so *identical.* First I must discover which was which, for it was a familiar game of theirs to switch identities. A certain softness of expression in the one, which was lacking in the other, made me decide that Timothy was to my left and Terence to the right.

"A grievous sin has been committed. Shall we pray together?" I began.

A startled look between them assisted my purpose, which was to confirm my deduction. Terence was the more instantly willing to speak with Our Lord than Timothy; it was a small indication of

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guilt, though it is true that if Timothy were the guilty party Terence might well wish to pray for aid from the Almighty.

When our prayers ceased, I told them gravely: "It is clear to Dr. Meek and myself that since at Mrs. Wright's table we all ate and drank from the same dishes and bottles, this tragedy cannot possibly have been due to an accident, and nor could any at that table have added anything to the tankards. Only the man who ladled out the wassail cup was in a position to do so. Which one of you was that?"

They showed no signs of wishing to dispute our ruling out ourselves from suspicion. On the contrary, they seemed to have been expecting this. They didn't even look at each other. They just grunted in unison: "It was me."

I looked from one to the other, hoping against hope that I was wrong in thinking this was a planned response. "Come now, both of you answering when one only held the ladle? That is not possible. Perhaps you mean that you discussed it beforehand, but at the moment I just wish to know which of you held the wassail cup."

"It was me." Another growl in unison.

I tried once more. "Loyalty is a noble virtue, but not for murder. A murderer is answerable to his fellow men as well as to God. He who defends him damns his own soul. I ask once more: Who held the ladle?"

"It was me." Again in unison. My heart sank. This was indeed planned, and any doubt that Dr. Meek and I were right in accusing one of them of the crime vanished.

"Look, Parson," Timothy said in the most kindly voice, "we've nought against you. We know you have to keep asking these questions. It's this way, though. Terence and I, we know who did it. But we reckon there's no way no one else can. Not for sure. So if we says we both did it, we're safe, see? You can't send us both to the lockup, can ye? God won't like you locking up an innocent man, he won't."

I stared at them, completely taken aback. How I longed for the comfort of my own parlour, and Dorcas's sound common sense to spur me on. On the table behind me were the remains of the flummery Solomon's Temple, and immediately I was put in mind of Dorcas's little joke: "Come, my beloved." Dorcas is more to me than housekeeper, and since she deems me an old Solomon, in our more intimate moments she reminds me of the Biblical Song of Solomon. Unfortunately, I never felt less like a Solomon in my life than now.

I did my best, however, as the happy, complacent faces of the Johnson brothers grinned at me.

"I am no magistrate," I told them grimly, "but he who abets a murderer might well suffer the same fate. Did you decide upon this plan of yours before you did the murder, or after?"

The grins disappeared, as if this was a question they hadn't

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thought of. Then their heads turned slowly towards each other; their dark eyes stared into the identical pair looking back at them and they both slowly nodded. Terence spoke this time:

"Don't rightly know, Parson. Just came to us, like. We both did it, see?"

"Only one of you took the wassail bowl round. Which?" I clung to this like a drowning man to a straw.

"Me," came the usual reply.

Then, to my relief, their tactics seemed to change, as Terence groaned: "We'll have to tell the Parson, I can see that. I did the old girl in. Timothy was Lord of the Harvest."

"Now, now, Terence," Timothy said indulgently. "You know you'm telling lies. I carried the bowl round, Parson. I put the poison in her tankard first."

I must have let out a faint cry, for they both began to look anxious. "It wasn't right, Parson, her cutting that last sheaf this afternoon," Timothy continued. "That be our job, not hers. And putting our wages down for saying so, it's not right. The master wouldn't do that."

Tactics hadn't altered after all, for Terence took up the tale. "So I thought why not make Mr. Wright master of his own farm, and do everyone a bit a good. I gathered a bit of old root, I expect you know the one, Parson. I grated it up a bit, had it in my pocket, see—"

"And then I dropped it in the tankard as I took it to the old besom." So calmly did Timothy pick up the tale again that the speaker might never have changed. "What with all the spices and that, I knew she'd never notice nothing."

"We both did it, all right, Parson. We've a mother to support, and how do we do that on lower wages than we get already? Afore God, Parson, it were both of us, or if it weren't, it were me," Terence finished stolidly.

"No, it were both of us, or if it weren't, it were *me,*" Timothy contradicted him.

I looked from one to the other. I pleaded, but they remained adamant. Each claimed they had done it, either separately or together.

At last I could hear King Solomon whispering in my ear. "Timothy," I said, "sing me the Harvest Song." I have a good ear for a voice and I could still hear the song in my memory. When he had finished, I told Terence to do the same. Reluctantly, I had to report to Solomon that his scheme did not work. They sounded exactly the same.

Solomon therefore obliged with an even better idea. The Lord of the Harvest's hair and smock would surely still display some evidence of the corn crown and garland. Feeling somewhat foolish, and summoning Dr. Meek to witness my search, I had to remind myself that I was here to represent the Law of England as well as

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the Law of God, and went round the table to inspect their hair and smocks at close quarters. Both men's hair was wet when I untied it from its fastenings. Alas, the well in the yard had obviously been busy, and the smocks proved as clean as Widow Johnson's laundry, without the slightest sign of a piece of corn.

"You seek to thwart God's will," I thundered. I am a mild man, but every preacher has need occasionally of a few fireworks to grasp his congregation's attention.

"We likes to keep clean and tidy," one of them said. I was too overwrought to register which. Only their mother could do that.

Thanks be for Solomon. Inspiration—and where does that come from but heaven where Solomon sits?—was mine. I almost beamed at these troublesome brothers as I saw my way clear. I told them to sit, and I walked to the barn door with a quick word to Dr. Meek not to abandon hope yet awhile. Outside, to my no great surprise, I found the Widow Johnson quietly waiting, huddled in her black shawl against the evening chill.

"Pray come in, Mrs. Johnson," I said quietly.

Anxiously she hobbled in after me, to the great annoyance of her sons. I gently explained to her—with some difficulty—that both of her sons had confessed to the murder of Mrs. Wright, but that only one could have carried out the deed. As she would not want to lose both, she must tell me which son bore the wassail cup.

Timothy and Terence seemed to think I was most unfair in bringing their mother into the arena. As she sobbed quietly to herself, I felt like a torturer of the old Inquisition.

" 'Tis not fair," shouted one of the brothers—I could not tell which from where I stood.

"She be an old woman," the other shouted angrily.

"Then tell me the truth yourselves." It was harder and harder to remain resolute in this terrible dilemma.

"My sons, my sons," she moaned, rocking to and fro on the chair I placed for her.

I tried to stiffen myself by reminding myself I was in the same position as King Solomon in the Temple when he had been faced with the problem of which of two women was the mother of the newborn babe before him.

"You will not tell me?" I asked her.

"We both did it," the brothers howled in answer for her.

"Very well. I shall name the man I believe murdered Mrs. Wright by poisoning her tankard, and call for the parish constable to take him in charge."

There was a deathly silence, and I braced myself to be strong. I did my best. I thundered. I roared. I spoke with impassioned sincerity of the justice of God, of the eternal damnation of murderers, and of my determination to save Cuckoo Lees from the stain of

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murder. At last I had their keen attention.

And then I spoke out: "I name Terence."

The brothers sat there grimly, while—presumably—they communicated their thoughts without the need of speech. But my attention was not on them but on their mother.

Would she cry out or would she stay silent? For a moment nothing happened, and then she screeched and she hollered.

I had dearly hoped she would have remained silent. I sighed. "So it is Timothy who must leave us."

"How do ye work that out?" cried Terence. " 'Twas me, you said it was."

"No," I said sadly. "Had it been you, and your mother faced with the necessity of losing one of you, she would have remained silent if justice had been done when I named you. She only protested because I named an innocent man."

They looked at one another again, and then at their mother, while I felt relieved that I had proved a modest Solomon in my own way. Solomon had threatened to cut the baby before him in two and the real mother, not wanting to see her child die, ceded her claim to her rival; I had threatened to deprive a mother of both her sons, and she had led me to the guilty one.

Unfortunately, there were two Solomons in the barn that evening. There was a little sob from the widow, and a, "Of course, I can't swear my Timothy added anything to the tankard. Have you proof of that, Parson Pennywick?"

For a moment she had confused me, until I thought about it logically. "They have confessed to the murder themselves, Mrs. Johnson," I said gently.

Mistakenly, however, I had taken my eyes off the brothers for too long. With a rush, they were past Dr. Meek, who tried in vain to catch them, and through the barn door to freedom. Dr. Meek hurried out to raise the alarm, and I stayed with the Widow Johnson to give her comfort—if that were possible.

"I need one of my boys at home, Parson," she told me plainly. "What else is there for me to do? It would be the workhouse for sure." There was a quiver in her voice, and there were tears running down her lined cheeks. "They were right in what they said. You can't charge them both, not without proof of both having planned it. You can't charge my Timothy without no proof it was him put the poison in the tankard. Could have been Terence. Mind you, I think you're right, Parson, seeing as how I want one of my boys at home. That Timothy, he's a clever one. He took that root stuff from my stores without me or Terence knowing. Planned it by himself, he did. 'Course Terence lied for him. He's his twin. Wanted to protect him."

The Widow Johnson looked up at me in appeal. She was right. I

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had no proof that there was any prior planning by the two of them, and no proof that Timothy had actually put the poison in the tankard. I bent over her to comfort her, patting her back covered in its black shawl. I recalled her taking it from the bag to put round herself when she left the barn with the rest of the company. The bag . . .

I looked down to where it sat at her feet, and I thought I heard Solomon breathe a sigh of relief that his reputation was not being tarnished. The bag still had something in it. I picked it up, and stuffed inside was a smock, which when I shook it showered shreds of corn over the floor.

"How did you know when you left home this evening that Terence would need a clean smock, Mrs. Johnson?" I asked quietly.

"She was the spider that spun this web," I told Dr. Meek as we rode home in Mr. Wright's carriage.

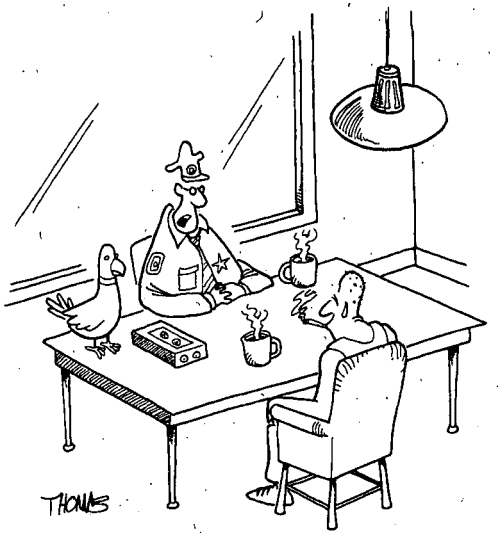
"What shall you tell the squire?"

"That justice is done."

"When all three walk free?"

"Not for long," I said gravely. "I heard earlier the press gang is in our village, and as the brothers sweat on the gun deck of our gallant sail of the line, as they ply the seas to the American colonies, I doubt they will think it freedom. The widow has lost her sons, and the workhouse offers little liberty to its inmates."

As the carriage turned into the parsonage drive, I saw the dim glow of a lamp still lit in my parlour. Dorcas awaited me, and cocoa would be her Solomon's song to me. And then we would to bed. ●



"Don't mind Polly. My tape recorder broke."

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LITTLE THINGS

by David Dean

It is curious that though David Dean is a police captain in a New Jersey resort city, and therefore has all sorts of inside information on crime and police procedure, he almost never writes about cops, and has never, to our knowledge, produced anything approaching a police procedural. He writes instead about ordinary people—and, very often, about animals. His attitude toward the animal world is hard to discern: Without a love for pets, could he write about them so well? Yet, the animals in his stories are often menacing. . . . †

Preston navigated the confines of the darkened bedroom with the confidence of long familiarity, tempered by the unwelcome caution born of encroaching years. He sensed, though he could not see, the dog watching him with lazy interest from the foot of the bed. The sharp corners of the bedstead were evaded with a practiced patting motion, learned from a painful history of thigh-level bruises. He now entered what should be the cleared territory leading to the en suite bathroom and sighed relief.

The dog yawned loudly behind him, the show no longer interesting. He knew that when he returned he would find the animal had stealthily taken his warmed place in the bed and he would have to shove its stout frame aside, as no whispered pleadings or demands had ever produced any result other than a low, threatening growl. Even then, her inert thirty-five pounds would remain unyielding as a sack of grain and he would have to content himself with just a slice of his former territory. Yet another reason that he so resented the demands that an ageing body placed on him, ensuring this nightly navigational challenge.

Preston's bare foot brushed something soft and woolly. "Damn," he whispered loudly, jerking his leg involuntarily into the air and teetering for a moment in the center of the room, his arms thrust out from his sides for balance. Instantly he knew what it must be and placed his foot hastily on the floor again before he toppled like some over-the-hill ballet dancer. From the bed his wife moaned softly.

One of the dog's goddamn chew toys, he thought angrily. Annie,

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his wife, called the animal-shaped, stuffed-cloth things "Fannie's dollies." Annie and Fannie, Preston mused. Like sisters, or mother and daughter.

For years Annie had been adamantly opposed to the idea of having a dog. Unlike Preston, she had grown up without ever having owned a pet and could not be convinced that the affection and companionship of an animal could possibly outweigh the chores and added responsibilities such a relationship would bring. The idea of a fur-shedding, carpet-wetting, furniture-chewing, muddy-pawed animal in her clean and well-kept home was simply not to be entertained. Preston had quietly, if somewhat sadly, surrendered to her views. Their children, like their mother before them, had grown up without a pet.

Then they encountered Fannie. It was years after the kids had moved away, during a shopping trip to the regional mall. Preston needed new walking shoes and Annie was in the market for "something new to wear to school." He had noticed of late that his teacher wife had grown more concerned about her appearance. She had always been a quietly attractive woman, but never overly concerned with fashion until now. Her choice in clothes was more colorful, and though her lithe figure had filled out somewhat with age, she took great care to accentuate some curves while drawing the eye away from others. Preston had attributed all this to a younger wife beginning to "catch up" to her older husband. All in all, Preston found her newborn sexiness more appealing than ever, if a little unsettling.

He had walked several feet before he realized that Annie was no longer by his side. He spun about to find her crouched before the plate-glass window of a pet shop, eye to eye with Fannie-to-be. Annie didn't coo or aah over the puppy, but squatted at eye level in a reverie of mutual entrancement. Neither noticed Preston watching them in bewilderment. Fifteen minutes later, they marched out of the mall with Annie clutching a frightened forty-five-dollar dog of no known pedigree, Preston's shoes forgotten. It was love at first sight.

Preston negotiated the chest of drawers that sat next to the bathroom door, its sharp corner raking his shoulder as he passed. Seven years had gone by since Fannie was brought home and the attachment between the dog and his wife had solidified into an unbreakable bond. At first, this had pleased him immensely. The funny-looking puppy, with its long, thick body, dwarfish legs, and huge, improbably erect ears had brought out a playfulness in Annie that Preston had never before seen. But with time their intimacy became increasingly exclusive and Preston felt the odd man out—inexplicably jilted by the dog, as well as his wife. Fannie had been hers from day one and, in spite of his long childhood

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experience with dogs, paid him little heed, accepting his attentions passively and without return, much as a cat might. He felt hurt, and somewhat frightened by the estrangement it seemed to point up between him and his wife of thirty years.

At last, finding the toilet by memory, he relieved himself noisily, a great sigh of satisfaction escaping his lips at this satisfying conclusion to his nightly perambulation. Now, he had only to return by the way he had come. He flushed, then turned to retrace his steps. Annie was a great and sound sleeper, which was why he never worried overly much about waking her. In fact, on some nights, the sound of her deep, unbroken breathing filled him with a kind of loneliness as he crept and stumbled through the darkness. He sometimes gave thought to just turning on a light, but a certain stubbornness, and an innate sense of courtesy, prevented him from doing so. The idea of a night-light, with its connotations of fear, or infirmity, was out of the question.

He encountered the open drawer containing his wife's cosmetics with his second step—the hard edge colliding with the thinly sheathed bone of his hip. "Sonofabitch," he hissed, clutching the pain with both hands and dancing about in a tight circle. When had Annie become so careless? The question bubbled up into his seething consciousness without bidding. He felt like shaking her awake in his pain-driven anger and screaming, "You used to be so attentive to details—what happened?"

He hobbled angrily back into the bedroom only to be greeted by the contented, commingled breathing of Fannie and her mistress, lying side by side in the gray dawning light, their heads nearly touching. The fury drained out of him as he contemplated this picture of blissful companionship and dejectedly made his way to his side of the bed. As usual, he was greeted with a low, throaty snarl when he shoved Fannie over, and through the gloom, just the faintest glint of a long white tooth.

Preston arose at seven, tired and cranky from yet another night's interrupted sleep. Additionally, his hip throbbed and he found a large bruise, purple and tender, as a painful reminder of his bathroom accident. Annie was already downstairs doing her exercises prior to heading out to work when he hobbled into the kitchen.

"What's wrong with your leg?" she inquired from the floor of the day room, her stretch-pant-clad legs scissoring the air as a morning news program mumbled from the TV set. Fannie lay next to her, head between her paws and rump firmly pushed up against her mistress's shoulder.

He stared at her a moment, remnants of last night's resentment simmering. "Banged it on a drawer you left open. You got me good." It came out playful: a routine patter they had developed

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over the last seven years or so to explain his proclivity for little accidents. Fannie's ever-alert ears swiveled in his direction.

"Did I now," she served back, never taking her eyes from the screen.

"Wanna see it?" he inquired pleasantly. He stepped out from behind the counter and his coffee-making preparations and tugged his pajama bottoms down a bit. The top of the bruise was just visible.

She glanced his way involuntarily with the motion, then quickly averted her eyes. "No! . . . Oh, honey, that looks like it really hurts." She grew a little pale.

Preston knew she could not abide the sight of anything painful: Bruises or blood made her faint and nauseous. He guiltily drew the pajamas back up and returned to his coffee. "A little," he offered as consolation. Then, "Not as bad as that busted nose last year." He winced at his unexpected dart.

She sat up, crossing her legs in one movement, supple as a young girl, a flash of anger in her eyes. Fannie sat up as well, studying him. "We're getting older, Preston. We can't help that."

Preston's own ire rose quickly to meet hers. "It would help, though, if you'd learn to close drawers and doors all the way," he spat back. "And if you want me to enjoy the rest of my retirement, maybe you could pick up after your dog a little. I'm gonna break my neck on her toys one of these days."

Annie stared at him for several moments before she answered, as if evaluating his condition. "I'm getting older, too, you know," she pronounced sadly, the corners of her generous mouth turning down like a pouting schoolgirl about to cry.

Preston could think of no answer to such a profoundly simple truth. He felt ashamed at his behavior.

Annie stood and strode past him towards the stairs, Fannie following.

"I'm sorry . . . I'm just tired of not sleeping well. That was stupid. . . ."

"I have to get ready for school," she cut him off; then dog and woman disappeared up the stairs.

Behind him the kettle began its high-pitched scream.

By the time Annie left for work, her ebullient mood of recent years had returned, and Preston offered no more apologies, just a simple, "Have a good day." He had learned, though it was not truly his nature, to sometimes just let things go betwixt Annie and himself.

When it was time for Fannie's morning walk he called out to her several times, but received no response. He found her under the coffee table, the place she generally retreated to when wishing to avoid him.

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"C'mon, girl, it's time for our walk," he pleaded.

She watched him with eyes so dark brown that they appeared black even against the jet of her fur. They glistened with trepidation.

He dangled her leash collar at floor level to demonstrate his intentions. She wanted none of it.

Exasperated, Preston marched into the kitchen, retrieved a box of dog biscuits, and rattled them loudly. There was a matching flurry of activity as Fannie scrambled out from under the low table. Moments later, she sat expectantly at his feet.

In a single practiced motion, Preston dropped the choke collar over her neck and cinched it with a tug of the leash. He replaced the biscuits in the cabinet, and with a none-too-gentle tug dragged the reluctant and disappointed dog out of doors.

Once out, Fannie seemed to resign herself to the inevitable, and with a shaking motion that made her ears snap like a flag in a high wind, set off at Preston's impatient side. Only the occasional glance out of the corner of her eye, and the fact that she kept the full leash distance from her master, betrayed her unease.

As Preston limped his way down the street, his mind kept straying to his argument with Annie. Was that really all of it? he wondered. Just getting older, more careless, more unsteady? He was in very good shape for a man of sixty-two: still flat-bellied and firm. Hell, he walked several miles a day—every day! He had slowed down, yes. But his reactions were still sharp, his hands still steady. Other than for reading, he didn't even need glasses. How many men his age could say that? He stopped for a moment so that Fannie could sniff a particularly interesting spot.

Who could have avoided an open drawer in a nearly pitch-black room? Or that half-closed closet door last year? He recalled standing over the sink washing his face; then, as he turned for the towel with closed eyes, suddenly slamming his cheek and nose into the door's edge of the linen closet directly behind him. The blow had stunned him and unleashed a gush of blood. For a moment he had felt so faint that he had had trouble staying on his feet. Then Annie had walked in, taken one look, and collapsed. It had been all he could manage to stanch the bleeding with a towel in one hand and half carry, half drag Annie over to the bed with the other.

Fannie marked the interesting spot in the usual canine manner and tugged ahead. Preston followed trancelike.

When Annie had recovered and finished cooing over his crooked nose, she had gently admonished him to pay more attention to his surroundings. Yet . . . something, Preston mulled. Something wasn't right . . . he should have noticed the open door; it was too narrow a room to ignore it.

Fannie had come to a quivering halt, having spied a squirrel

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with the temerity to leave its tree. The rodent sat on its haunches several yards away, coolly appraising them, while the dog whined her disapproval. Preston was oblivious.

That morning, when he had had soap in his eyes and the water running, hadn't he heard, or thought he heard, someone (Annie, of course) come into the room? He suddenly felt certain of one thing: The closet door had been closed in the beginning. She must have gotten something from the linen closet and forgotten to close it behind her. That would be it! Just like the drawer last night.

Preston had to practically drag the straining Fannie away from the offending squirrel and down to the end of the street. All around him was the quiet of an emptied suburban neighborhood and suddenly he felt very, very alone. He turned for home on uncertain feet, his hip throbbing.

His mind raced through the past, from incident to incident: circling, probing, recoiling; only to return again like a dog to vomit. Things he had experienced, and forgotten, crept back laden with portent: The time he had tripped on the throw rug just inside the front door, narrowly missing striking his skull on the coffee table. Hadn't he noticed, in the split second before his tumble, that the rug was flipped back? Why should it have been? Annie always came in through the garage, where she parked her car. He was the only one to use the front entrance.

Other memories swirled about him and fought for air: What about the time he had broken his leg getting out of the shower? He had just turned off the water, thrown back the curtain, and placed one foot out in order to reach the towel rack, when his dripping foot went skidding across the slick linoleum. The other leg was pinned awkwardly beneath his weight as he fell painfully back into the tub, fracturing his tibia with a sickening pop. Where was the bath mat? He was certain it had been there when he entered the shower. Later, as the medics loaded him onto a gurney, he recalled seeing it through a nauseous fog of pain, wadded up in the corner of the room. At the time he had assumed the emergency personnel had simply kicked it aside, and that he had just somehow misstepped.

Preston felt his chest tightening and his breath becoming shallow and rapid. He wanted to just sit down on someone's well-kept lawn, but Fannie pulled for home and he followed like a blind man.

How many times had he stumbled on Annie's shoes, scattered about the house in improbable and unexpected places? In fact, all these little things—the drawers and doors, the doggie toys left on the stairs, the ruffled throw rugs—had become a source of good-natured bantering between them, Preston accusing her of setting up his "accidental" demise, and Annie reminding him of the feeble-

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ness of encroaching age—almost always followed by an arch inquiry into whether he was keeping up his insurance premiums. It was all just a joke between them. The good-natured banter of a man with a wife twelve years younger than himself. It had to be.

Man and dog turned into the driveway and Preston regarded his two-storied home like a stranger, his steps heavy with dread. His whole world had tilted to an unfamiliar angle in the course of a short walk down the street.

He released Fannie's leash and watched in a daze as she raced to the door, anxious for the treats within. When he did not follow on her heels, she turned to see what was the matter. Preston was as still as a lawn ornament.

"No," he whispered. "No. It doesn't make sense."

His mind raced ahead of his words. It's such a hit-or-miss way to kill someone, he thought. It could take years. Yet . . . by God, it would be foolproof, though. Who on earth would question such a thing? At his age; with his history. Annie had undoubtedly shared his misfortunes with her fellow teachers. The hospital had records.

But why? Could she hate him that much? Was that what this was all about? A secret, seething detestation that had developed over their nearly three decades of marriage? Was it possible that all these accidents were just the result of subconscious resentment manifesting itself in a particularly malevolent way?

Fannie whined at him from the doorway; then turned to scratch and nose at the door in impatience.

Or was it money, after all, just like she said? He didn't have to look to know his policy carried a double-indemnity clause for accidental death. Annie would receive a half-million dollars in such a case, the house, free and clear, and all his pension. That's well-off, by almost anyone's standards.

Fannie was standing on her hind legs gripping the doorknob between her paws in an almost human way, but to no avail. Preston cursed, "It's locked, you stupid bitch," and plodded forth like a man going to his own execution.

Preston spent the next several weeks in an agony of suspicion and paranoia, unable to stop watching Annie whenever she was present, and listening with superhuman effort to her movements when she was out of the room. He fancied he could hear a pin drop on a carpeted floor in another room. But then he chided himself for giving way to unhealthy fantasy, turning up the volume on the television to drown out his imagination; then turning it back down again for fear of masking the sounds of preparations inimical to his own survival. He took to grinding his teeth while both asleep and awake.

Incredibly, it seemed to him, Annie appeared oblivious to his

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changed behavior, going about her household chores as blithely and cheerfully as ever. Was she that indifferent to his suffering? Or was she simply masking her awareness to disguise her guilt? These were questions that were slicing through Preston's mind and heart like razor wire. But, how to answer them?

Fannie, on the other hand, had no doubts about the changes occurring within her household, and no qualms about demonstrating where she stood in the matter. When her mistress was present, she remained within feet of her at all times; to the point where even Annie lost patience with her being underfoot and scolded her on occasion. The dog was not deterred, but maintained her sentry duty; always with an eye to Preston's whereabouts.

Sometimes, when they found themselves sharing the same room, Preston would engage the little dog in a staring contest as a hot rebuke for its constant vigilance of him. Inevitably, she would turn away, and Preston would chuckle with sour amusement over his besting of Annie's guardian. The victory was always short-lived, as the dog would return its gaze within moments and the contest would resume anew, much to Preston's disgust.

It was during one such silent skirmish after dinner that Annie revealed the first crack in her seemingly contented ignorance. "Preston! What are you doing?"

Preston's head shot up to find his wife staring at him with some concern. He felt his stubbled cheeks grow warm. "Nothing . . ." he blurted as guiltily as one of her schoolchildren. "I was thinking about something, I guess."

"No, you weren't. You were staring Fannie down, weren't you?" It wasn't really a question. "That kind of thing spooks her, you know. Is that why she's been acting funny around you lately?"

Before he could frame a suitable lie, she moved on. "Have you been feeling all right?"

Preston wanted to answer honestly, to say no. How could he be all right when he was poisoned with the idea, the fear, that his own wife wished him dead? Instead, he found himself blurting defensively, "Why do you ask?"

Annie put down the magazine she had been reading and rearranged herself in the large wicker chair, all the while watching her husband's face. "You seem a little funny lately, and now that I'm looking at you, you don't look all that good. Your stomach been okay?"

"What do you mean?" Preston shot back. "My stomach is fine. Why shouldn't it be?" He squinted at her suspiciously. "Anything wrong with the food you've been feeding me?"

"What . . ." Annie began in a hoarse whisper, her face suddenly blanched of color. "Preston, I . . ." She stopped speaking as the import of his words struck home, a scarlet tide rising from her

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throat and infusing her features. She leapt to her feet, the magazine fluttering from her lap to the floor. Preston had never seen her so angry before and unconsciously leaned back in his seat, cowed by the sheer furnace-blast intensity of her expression. "You son of a bitch . . ." she hissed. "How dare you think such a thing? And you do, don't you? . . . Don't you?" she demanded.

Preston sat as one struck dumb, staring up into the horribly transformed image of his wife's face. For the first time in their long relationship, he was afraid: not uneasy or distressed, but literally and physically terrified of his wife. He knew now that she could surely kill him. Her blazing eyes told him all that, and promised more.

"Don't you?" Annie shouted once more, stamping the floor with one small foot.

A large pair of scissors fell from the sewing basket next to her chair with the vibration and landed with a muffled thump on the carpet, as a dark form detached itself from Annie's shadow to circle and sniff the sharp instrument.

Husband and wife found themselves staring at the same object as a thick silence filled the small room and seemed to darken the air. Preston chewed his lower lip. When he detached his gaze long enough to glance back up at his wife, he found her expression altered yet again.

The deathly pallor had returned, and in her eyes he saw the fear that he felt sure was mirrored in his own. "Preston," she stammered. "Oh, Preston . . ." Annie turned and marched shakily from the room. When she reached the kitchen door she stopped long enough to announce, "You don't have to worry about 'the food' tonight, unless you poison yourself. I'll grab something to eat after the parent-teacher meeting."

"Meeting?" he inquired weakly.

"Yes, Preston . . . meeting. I've been going for years on Thursday nights." And with that, she was gone.

Preston scanned the silent room for Fannie, but like her mistress, she had vanished into the dark.

Preston waited fifteen minutes before he followed Annie to the Board of Education building where the meetings were held. Now that he knew his wife wanted him dead, he wanted to know why.

When he had picked up the keys to his fifteen-year-old Camry, it had been without conscious plan. Like the subject of a carnival hypnotist, he had simply followed the instructions of an unheard voice. As he turned into the deserted parking lot, that tiny voice became suddenly audible, its volume increasing with confidence. The building was dark, and the empty asphalt winked with pud-

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dles from an earlier rain. *She lied,* the now familiar voice whispered. *As she has lied for years.*

Preston waited in the dark of the bedroom for his wife's return, his mind racing back and forth like a rat in a maze, a captive of his hateful epiphany. Everything that had once seemed familiar appeared foreign, even the well-worn armchair he occupied felt like stage dressing, and he an actor thrust suddenly onto the set without preparation or even desire for the role, yet the curtain had gone up and a hostile audience murmured in the darkness. The earthy, sweet scent of his wife wafted up to him from a nightgown tossed carelessly over the arm of the chair, and he felt like weeping. Outside, a car door slammed, the noise answered by the frantic scrabble of nails on hardwood floors. Annie was home.

A few moments later Preston heard the kitchen door open, followed by the always delighted, if this time muted, exchange of greetings between Annie and her beloved dog. A pause followed, and by dint of the almost preternatural hearing he had developed of late, Preston heard Annie ask the dog, "Why are all the lights out, honey?" Followed by a distinct *click* and the sound of her footsteps ascending the stairs. A second click cast the second-floor hallway into sudden brilliance, the light spilling into the bedroom where Preston sat waiting now in the shadows.

Annie stepped into the doorway, sharply outlined by the light at her back, and peered hesitantly into the room; a smaller outline beside her hesitated also, its ears alert and etched in black. A low growl percolated in the throat of Annie's protectress. "Preston . . ." Annie whispered, unable to make out the details of the room. "Are you asleep?"

Preston thought his wife sounded hopeful and took spiteful pleasure in startling her with his reply from an unexpected quarter. "No, I'm not."

Annie jumped and spun about to face the direction his voice had come from. "Oh God! . . . Preston, for Christ's sake, you scared me half to death. What on earth are you doing over there?" With that she threw on the bedroom light and it was his turn to be discomfited, squinting against the glare like a toad suddenly discovered under an overturned stone.

He shaded his eyes with a flattened hand and stared at her as if she were far away. "Who is he?" he inquired calmly but firmly. He wanted Annie to know that he was in control of things now and would have the truth at last.

"Who is who?" Annie asked back, a tone of frightened defiance in her voice.

"Who is he?" Preston repeated flatly.

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"Preston, I . . . What are you talking about? I've been to a parent-teacher—"

"The man you were just with. Who is he?"

"Preston, tomorrow morning, first thing, I want you to call Dr. Schneider and get a referral for—"

"A fellow teacher," Preston plowed on, undeterred. "The principal? . . . He came onto the scene at about the right time, as I remember. Seven years ago, wasn't it? That's when things started to change. You got Fannie, you started to spend more on clothes, you began to 'work out,' you got more involved at school. A lot more involved, maybe. Things changed, Annie."

"Do you hear yourself, Preston?" Annie fired back angrily, an unmistakable quaver in her voice. "You're frightening me!"

"I'm frightened, too, Annie," Preston answered. "You frightened me. You changed and I started to get hurt. Just little things, at first."

"Are you talking about the bathroom drawer you banged your hip on? Is that what this is all—"

"The bathroom drawer, the linen closet, the bath mat, the throw rug . . . I could go on, but you get the point. More importantly, I get the point. It was never like this before. Things changed. Who is he?"

"My God, Preston, you think I'm trying to . . . that's insane . . ." Annie cut herself off. Preston could see that she was trying to think. She walked closer to the door. "Maybe I have gotten a little careless in my housekeeping, and I know I've gotten a lot more involved at the school, but with the kids gone and you at home all the time now, well, I guess my focus is just . . . different than it was. Doesn't that make sense to you?"

Preston's gaze was unflinching. "You weren't at the school board tonight. No one was . . . except me."

Annie broke for the stairs, and without willing it, Preston shot up from the chair in pursuit. Even in heels, she had almost reached the landing by the time he had gained the top of the stairs. With a roar of anger he launched himself down them two at a time.

Annie risked a quick glance back, her face a pale, frightened blur as Preston came charging after her. With a terrified squeak, she made the turn for the final set and the doorway to the world beyond, knowing that she would never succeed.

Preston was two steps from the landing when his foot landed on something soft and he felt a sharp pain in his ankle. Suddenly he was hurtling forward, his momentum converted to free-fall. With a terrific crash he impacted the wall, spun about by the force, and fell against the bannister, crashing through it as if it were so much matchwood. Somehow he was cognizant of Annie's scream

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as he seemed to hang in midair above the polished hardwood of the living-room floor. Moments later he completed his journey with a bone-crunching thump that reverberated through the house and down to its very foundations. From the kitchen, something smashed to the floor in sympathy. Then there was silence.

When he opened his eyes, Preston had no idea how much time had passed, though he could see that it was still dark. More importantly, and surprisingly, he felt no pain from his fall, though he did feel somewhat woozy and lightheaded. Something moved at the edge of his vision, and Annie's face came into view looking down into his own with a worried, frightened expression. The night's events returned to him in a flood of emotion, as if his pursuit had never been interrupted. "Lying bitch," he hissed, reaching for the throat that was so tantalizingly close.

It was then he had his second surprise of the evening. His hands did not appear as he had willed them to do. Annie drew back with a gasp, but remained watching him, the look of fear on her face gradually assuming another, less readable expression.

Preston grunted with the effort of trying to rise to his feet. But nothing happened. His position remained unchanged. He found that he was able to turn his head, though not to lift it. From somewhere betwixt his head and his feet came a gentle lapping sound, almost that of a brook running through stones.

"Annie, help me up," he demanded.

His wife withdrew from his field of vision, a sickened look on her face, and said, "Stop that! Stop it!"

Was she talking to him? Preston tried again to lift his head; to no avail.

"Annie, goddamnit! Am I tied up?"

There was a long pause, and he rolled his head back and forth in an attempt to see what was going on around him. Annie startled him by suddenly stepping back into his field of vision. Preston could see that she was on the verge of tears, yet her mouth was set in a line of grim determination.

"Preston," she began gently. "You're in a bad way. I think you were . . . punctured somehow when you fell through the railing. You can't move, can you?"

"A doctor," he whispered, unable to muster the strength to speak louder; the full horror of his predicament sinking into his shocked brain. "Annie, call nine-one-one," he pleaded. The lapping sound resumed somewhere at the edge of his consciousness.

Annie's lips pursed in concern, then resumed their grim set. She made a motion at something out of sight, as if shooing a chicken.

"Preston, how can I do that? What would you tell them, if I did? After all, now it might look like I really *was* trying to kill you . . . if they hear what you've been thinking. But there's not a word of

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truth to that, Preston . . . never.

"I *was* at the parent-teacher meeting tonight. It's been held at the high school for the past three months because they're removing some asbestos from the Board of Ed building."

She paused, as if to let the information sink in. Preston began to hear a great roaring in his ears; a slight nausea made itself felt.

"You were right about one thing, though," Annie resumed. "Your accidents—my 'carelessness'—did begin about seven years ago when we . . ." She quickly corrected herself. "When I . . . brought Fannie home. I didn't say anything—didn't want to say anything, because of her. You see, she has a way of getting in your way. I'm amazed, really, that you never caught on, but you've always been self-absorbed, Preston.

"It was Fannie that nosed open the linen closet that time. It was partially my fault, because I hadn't shut it properly. As to the bath mat and throw rug and her toys being strewn on the stairs and such . . . I can't explain it exactly, but she just doesn't like you. I believe she's jealous." With that she stepped out of his dimming vision.

Preston was able to roll his head with great effort to follow his wife's movements. She was marching to the front door carrying an overnight bag that she must have packed while he was unconscious. He managed to croak pleadingly, "Where are you going? Don't leave, Annie!"

She paused and regarded him thoughtfully for a moment as if carefully weighing what she was about to say. "You were right about something else, Preston. You may as well know now. I've been seeing Richard, you know, our principal, for some time. I phoned him while you were . . . out, and suggested we play hooky for a three-day weekend." A sad, wistful look crossed her face, and just for a moment Preston hoped that she might relent. "I'll be back Sunday night," she blurted suddenly, fearful as a schoolgirl, and slammed out the door. The sound of the deadbolt sliding home echoed like a shot.

In the newborn stillness of the house, the lapping sound resumed with a sudden vigor, and Preston turned his head just in time to see something dark scurry to the far corner of the room and pace impatiently. ●

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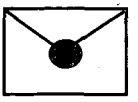

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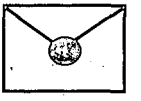

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LOVE-LIES-BLEEDING

by Barbara Cleverly

It had taken me two hours to get here. I swished my way, bouncing through the puddles in a haze of falling leaves up the long drive to Felthorpe Hall in north Norfolk. Now, Norfolk isn't Suffolk, and that's a fact. The skies are wider, the building flints are bigger, the distances greater, and the cry of the wheeling plover more forlorn. Only fifty miles from home, but Felthorpe Hall could never have been in Suffolk.

For the last half-hour of my journey through dripping lanes, the rain had eased off, the sun had come out, and the whole countryside had taken on a more cheerful cast. But it would still have to work a whole lot harder to please me, I thought resentfully. I drove carefully down the tree-lined carriage road to the Hall, eagerly awaiting my first sight of the ancient house, so praised in the architectural guide I had hastily referred to before I started out. I turned a corner and there it stood by the side of a dark, reed-fringed, and heron-haunted lake.

The front door was wide and welcoming, its brick dressings satisfyingly good-hearted, and the lowering sun, reflected from its many windows, spoke of ancient warmth, but as I got out of my car I paused and shivered.

"Keep off! Go away!" said the house to me.

"Deus tute me spectas," said a stone inscription in the parapet. "Thou, Lord, see'st me."

All too likely, I thought.

I didn't want to be here. It wasn't my job. I paused for a moment to curse my boss, Charles Hastings. The words "spoilt" and

The Barbara Cleverly stories published to date by *EQMM* have all been in the architect Ellie Hardwick series, but Ms. Cleverly has been gaining a reputation in both the U.K. and the U.S. over the past few years for a quite different series, set in India in the last days of the Raj. The protagonist of that series is Joe Sandiland, a Scotland Yard inspector who in the most recent book to be published here, *The Damascened Blade* (Carroll & Graf), investigates murder on the Afghan border.

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"manipulative" were as closely associated with his name in my mind as were "rosy" and "fingered" with dawn in Homer's. I ought to have seen this coming. Well, the truth was—I had. So why had I gone along with it? For the joy of seeing a gem of a house I had never visited before and the satisfaction of arriving by myself and saying, "Hello, I'm the architect, Eleanor Hardwick." By myself, not scuttling in Charles's wake carrying the files and the hard hats and answering to the name of "little Miss . . . er . . ."

We do a lot of work for the English Country Houses Trust. Of the grandees who run it, Charles appears to have been at school with the few to whom he is not related. And, as our region of East Anglia is thickly strewn with great houses, the practice is a busy one. It was one of the reasons—it was my main reason—for applying for the job of his architectural assistant. Charles calls his Trust work the office "bread and butter." I would call it the "strawberry jam." I'm mad about ancient buildings. I always have been. And if you're lucky enough to get a job working for an expert in this field and you're based between Cambridge and the North Sea, you've died and gone to heaven!

The lush, rolling countryside seamed with narrow overhung lanes is rich in ancient churches, cathedrals, and even a castle or two, as well as the old domestic buildings. Down one of the overhung lanes in the middle of the county of Suffolk is Charles's house, a wing of which masquerades as his office. Latin Hall is a fine though eccentric showcase for Charles's skills. For a start, it's thatched, and to go on, it was built in the late thirteen hundreds. Yes, *thirteen* hundreds. There was still a Roman Emperor on the throne when the foundations were being dug, Charles told me at my interview. A rather debased emperor, perhaps, and ruling out of Constantinople, but it made a good story for the clients. They were intended to draw the inference—"If this bloke can keep this building standing, he might be able to do something for *mine.*"

My first autumn working at Latin Hall was miserable. The weather was exceptionally wet and the medieval house leaked badly. The rain-swollen doors stuck, the windows funnelled the icy draughts that knifed down from the Arctic. Charles laughed at my complaints. "Keep you healthy, Ellie," he'd said. "Nothing like a low temperature and a constant air circulation to kill off the bugs! Much better for you to inhale air straight from Siberia than that pre-breathed rubbish they fill your lungs with in London."

Rain fell in torrents, torrents were followed by gales, tarpaulins blew off roofs, and water rose in cellars as it never had before. Every time I looked out of the window thinking that the rain could get no heavier, it redoubled its maniacal and mindless persistence. But there was one source of cheerful amusement for me in all this

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gloom. Charles had caught a very bad cold! I came in one morning to find him hunched over his desk, clutching a box of tissues.

"For goodness' sake, Charles," I said, "go home! You don't have to stay here!" I pointed to the wall chart. "You've got no meetings today or tomorrow and then it's the weekend. Go home, have a bath, find a good book, and go to bed. I'll man the main brace."

He winced.

"Can't," he said. "Just had a call from the Trust. Felthorpe Hall. Main staircase. There's a problem. I've just been looking up my last quinquennial survey report." He paused and pretended to run a critical eye over it. "It's rather good, I think. Listen to this, Ellie, and mark the style." He began to read:

"The condition of the main staircase has been mentioned in previous reports and its stability is now a matter of concern. A newel stair with four quarter-space landings, its strength is dependent on the support each flight derives from the flight below. Provided tenons are sound, . . ." He droned on and I switched off. *". . . is due to more than shrinkage and old age."*

"Well, what do you think?"

"I'd say you'd covered yourself pretty well, there, Charles . . . all those *provided-that*s and *suspicions-of*s," I began to say, but he interrupted.

"It is always my concern, Ellie, to have a care for the building as well as my own neck. I go on: *I would suggest that where shrinkage gaps are to be seen, small hardwood wedges be lightly inserted, and if the distortion referred to increases, these wedges will fall. Should this happen, further structural investigation would appear imperative."*

"Don't tell me! Your wedges have fallen?"

"They have. Luckily, the house is closed to the public for end-of-season cleaning, but they've got some sort of anniversary shindig coming up at Christmas. So they ring me. 'Is this staircase safe?' they want to know. What can I say? 'Leave it to me. I'll come up and have a look.' " He blew his nose dolefully once more, pushed his spectacles up onto his forehead, and rubbed his reddened eyes.

His partner was on holiday. There was only one thing I could say. "Look, tell them you can't come until next week, or if there's a panic on, I'll go for you. Why not? I don't think you'll make much sense in your present condition."

Charles blinked and shivered theatrically for a moment, looked doubtful, and then said, as though my offer was all so unexpected, "Well, if you're sure, Ellie, that would be a godsend . . . and it's not as though you could do any real damage . . . I mean, I've laid on a carpenter—Johnny Bell will meet you there at half-past two. He's very experienced and—"

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"Just give me the file, Charles! But—Felthorpe Hall? Where is it, incidentally?"

"Er . . . North Norfolk," he had mumbled apologetically.

The house may not have welcomed me, but the carpenter, Johnny Bell, greeted me warmly enough in the hallway from which a fine newel stair climbed its way to a dim upper floor. I needn't have come, really. Mr. Bell was perfectly capable of taking up a few boards, dismantling a few stair treads, and, indeed, diagnosing the problem and solving it. The architect is very often the third wheel on the bicycle. This was one of those occasions. He knew it, and so did I. But with kindly East Anglian courtesy he explained the situation and even managed to make it appear he was hanging on my words.

"Didn't like to start until you got here, Miss Hardwick. Thought if we took up a couple of treads here and a floorboard on the landing and perhaps the riser off the step up into the pass door, we ought to see what we're up to."

I was about to say, "Nails must be cut and punched . . ." but almost before I could speak he had slipped a hacksaw under the first stair tread and had started to cut the nails which held it in place. When he'd slipped the stair treads out of the strings, the risers followed with no more difficulty. We knelt together on the stairs and peered into the cavity we had created. I held the torch while Johnny Bell felt inside.

"Carriage has gone," he said. "It's supposed to be bird's-mouthed under the trimmer and . . ." feeling along the wall, "the wall string's gone in the same place."

I reached into the hole, broke off a section of timber, and brought it into the light.

"Deathwatch beetle," I said.

"How do you know?" said a voice behind us.

I turned to confront a tall, stooping, birdlike figure peering over our shoulders. He reminded me of one of the bony herons I'd seen on arrival, hunched at the edge of the lake. This was Nicholas Wemyss, the curator, and introductions followed.

"How do you know?" he asked again.

"If the flight holes are big enough to let you poke a match head into them, it's deathwatch beetle. If they're only big enough for a pin, it's woodworm—furniture beetle, that is," I said, as I'd been taught.

"Ah!" said Nicholas, looking impressed. "Now I really appreciate a complicated technical explanation! But, Ellie, is this serious? Does it mean the stairs are unsafe?"

"Well, it shouldn't be left. Some of this bore dust," I held out a sample, "is quite fresh and, no, it probably isn't quite safe." I

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looked at Johnny, who was nodding in agreement. "Let's see if we can take up a board on the quarter landing. That'll tell us more."

Once more the hacksaw blade disappeared under the stair nosing, and one by one the ancient nails were snipped through. The first mighty board came loose. Loose for the first time since some ancient carpenter had tapped it into place over three hundred years before. Johnny waggled it to and fro, inserted the end of a nail bar, and prised it upwards. "Can't move it!" he said in surprise. "That's stuck! There's something under there!"

He poked around with the end of a two-foot rule. "Yes, bugger me—there's something under there!"

We watched in puzzlement as he took up a second board. With that obstruction gone, the first board came out more easily. But it was unnaturally heavy. It was as much as the two of us could lift and, as it came from its ancient seating, "Corst blast!" said Johnny. "There's a little old box fastened up to the bottom of that!"

"Little old box, nothing!" said Nicholas. "No . . . that's a little old coffin!"

There was no mistaking it. The profile of a coffin lid is in some way branded on the memory. The eternal symbol of death and dissolution, an object of reasonless fear buried in the country memories of us all. It was tiny; not above two feet long. A whiff of profound grief and misery briefly embraced us all as the darkness deepened, the thunderous rain began to fall again, and the damp chill of the day sharpened to an icy coldness.

The carpenter ran a knowledgeable hand over the small structure. *Must have made hundreds of coffins in his time,* I thought.

"Oak boards. Nicely made," he said, absently caressing the joints with a craggy thumb. "That were tacked up from below." He slipped the point of a chisel under the rim of the coffin and pressed upwards against the covering board. "Lift it off, shall I?"

"No! Wait!" I heard my own voice call out. I didn't want him to take off the lid. I didn't want to see what the box held. "Perhaps we should call the police? Isn't that what you do when you find a . . . er . . . come across a burial?"

"If that's what it is, it's a very *ancient* burial," said Nicholas gently. "I don't think the police will be interested in something so old. Because it *is* very old, wouldn't you say?"

"It went in the same day as the staircase was put up," said Johnny Bell firmly. "The only way you could get it in with this construction."

"So we have a date, then," said Nicholas. "Diana will know. My wife, Diana. She's somewhere about. . . ."

"Sixteen sixty-two. That's the year it was put in." A low clear voice called down to us from the upper floor. Diana came to join us,

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taking in the strange scene at a glance. "Oh dear! How extraordinary! But how fascinating! Look, with the stairs in their present parlous state I think we should take whatever that is downstairs and put it on the big table in the yellow drawing room and decide what to do about it when we're in no danger of disappearing through a hole. Eleanor, is it? Eleanor Hardwick? I'm Diana Wemyss. I was just making you a cup of tea. Perhaps that can wait for a few minutes?"

I smiled as Diana's comforting presence chased away the chill forebodings. She couldn't have been more different from her gaunt husband. Short and rounded, with merry brown eyes, she had the cheerful and confident charm of a robin. We all made our way backwards down the stairs and into the drawing room and gathered around the little box waiting for Diana to tell us what to do next.

"We really have to open it," she said. "Too embarrassing if we hauled a busy constable all the way out from Norwich to witness us opening an empty container."

Everyone nodded, and Johnny got to work again with his chisel. Hardly breathing, we all peered into the coffin as the lid rose.

"Ah," said Diana in an unsteady voice. "Nicholas, perhaps you'd better inform the constabulary? Just to be on the safe side."

Two hours later, an inspector had called and viewed the pathetic contents of the box, and had taken brief statements. He agreed that the burial had been clandestine and there'd probably been dirty work at the crossroads back in the 17th C. but, really, this was one for "Time Team," not the Norfolk constabulary. He was quite happy to leave it, as he put it, "in the hands of the experts." That was us. We were on our own.

On a scatter of almost-fresh sawdust in the bottom of the box lay the yellowed bones of a very small infant. It lay on its side in a fetal position and, as far as our appalled and fleeting glances could determine, there was no obvious cause of death. There was no tattered winding sheet, no identifying bracelet. The only other thing the box contained was a slip of parchment. It had been glued inside the lid and so remained unaffected by the decay within the box. On it a neat hand had written, *"Deus tute eum spectas."*

"Good heavens!" said Diana. "What have we here? The lost heir of the Easton family?"

I remember even then, in the turmoil of mixed emotions I was feeling, that something was off-key. I felt sick and guilty that we had, however innocently, displaced and disturbed the little body after all those years. With uncomfortable sideways glances at each other, we had replaced the lid on the coffin, Johnny Bell solemnly

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making the sign of the cross before packing up his tools and leaving.

Gratefully I accepted Diana's invitation, in view of the late hour and the filthy weather, to stay the night in one of the guest rooms. While she put together a supper in their small flat on the second floor, Nicholas invited me to come round the house with him as he "put it to bed." I watched him set alarms and lock doors, the whole process taking about half an hour. As we wandered down through the dark house, our progress was much delayed by Nicholas's discursions as we passed one beautiful thing after another.

Pausing finally in the gallery which encircled the staircase at first-floor level, he drew my attention to a run of portraits. "I'd like to haul this lot in for interrogation, Ellie," he said. "I bet one of *them* could tell us more about the contents of that box. The Easton family. They were all here the year the staircase was put in. They came up from their London home for the jollifications in sixteen sixty-two. The celebrations covered the restoration of the monarchy two years earlier, but also the marriage of the younger brother of the earl."

He lifted the shade of a table lamp and held it upwards. "Here he is, with his wife alongside. This is the chap whose anniversary we're celebrating this Christmas. Father of the dynasty. His descendants still live hereabouts—they gave the house to the Trust thirty years ago. Robert Easton. Took over when his elder brother died childless in sixteen seventy-two."

I looked up at the handsome florid features of Robert Easton, Earl of Somersham. An impressive man in a shoulder-length curling brown wig, he wore a coat of dark blue velvet with gold frogging over a ruched shirt of finest white linen, a lace jabot at his throat. The painter had conveyed his subject's confidence and pride by the seemingly casual placing of one elegant hand on his hip.

Nicholas for a moment dipped the lamp to illuminate the left-hand corner of the painting. I was impressed but not surprised to read : "P. Lely *pinxit.*"

"A Peter Lely!"

Nicholas smiled. "Yes, the Dutchman who painted all those sumptuous portraits of Charles Stuart's mistresses. The Windsor beauties. All white bosoms, floating draperies, and slanting invitation in their sloe-black eyes. Hmm . . ."

We looked together at the lady in this painting. She was young and fair and quite lovely, but here were no sloping shoulders, no flirtatious glance to the artist. Her gown was of chestnut silk, draped and shimmering, and the luscious autumnal colouring was all that you could have hoped for from Lely but worn with an unusual modesty, her only jewellery a simple pearl necklace. In her lap rested a basket overflowing with autumn fruits and flow-

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ers—a cornucopia. In the background leaves drifted down from stately parkland trees.

"Mary, Countess of Somersham, as she became on her husband's accession to the title. We assume this was a wedding portrait—it was certainly done in the year of their marriage when Robert was the younger brother-in-waiting. Not much of a catch for a girl, you might think, but he was—for *her.* She was no aristocrat. Mary was the daughter of a Quaker shipbuilder, but very rich, so they both got what they wanted from the marriage. An unusual match, but it turned out well."

"And the cornucopia is a pointed reference to the wealth she was bringing to the Easton family?"

"That's right. After the lean years of the Commonwealth it was a miracle they had survived as a family at all, and they were certainly pleased to have her injection of cash. Bet if the truth were known she even paid for the staircase! She saved the whole dynasty. She was fruitful in other ways, too," he added, showing me a further picture.

A charming portrait showed seven children gambolling in a landscape which was clearly Felthorpe Hall. Formally dressed miniatures of adults, they played with toys and small spaniels or clustered at the feet of their mother, an older and now matronly Mary. All here was sunshine striking satin, rounded pink cheeks, and laughing eyes. An idyllic scene. A perfect family. I said as much to Nicholas.

He grunted. "Unfortunately, not perfect. These little poppets had the most appalling uncle. They only inherited because William, Robert's older brother, died an early death. A lethal combination of drink and the pox, it's said. He died abroad and spent very little time here at Felthorpe, which was held together by the efforts of Robert and his trusty steward."

The light changed direction again and illuminated a third portrait.

A harsh white face in a black periwig. A diamond ring on a thin white hand lightly holding a small purple flower, a bunch of lace, lidded eyes. A clever face. A voluptuous face. I shivered.

"Wicked William Easton," said Nicholas.

"Not by Lely, this one," I said, peering more closely at the portrait. "But a similar style, surely?"

"It's unsigned, and we have no record of the painter. A pupil of Lely? Could be. Skillfully done, though. Taken during William's youth, obviously, before he became dissolute."

I shuddered. "That man was born dissolute!"

I looked again at the hooded eyes and tried to read their expression. Dark and scornful, but there was more—they gleamed with unconcealed invitation. The full lips twisted with a humourless

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certitude. This man knew he could have anyone he wanted. After more than three centuries, he still had the power to make me look away, blushing, repelled and overwhelmed by the force of his flaunting sexuality.

Locking more doors, having first checked that all the rooms were empty, and turning off the last remaining lights, we returned to the landing.

"Hang on! Wait a minute!" I said. "There's someone downstairs."

"Can't be," said Nicholas comfortably. "There's no one in the house but ourselves."

"Sorry. For a moment I thought I saw someone under the stairs. Where does that door lead to?"

"Doesn't lead anywhere. It's been blocked for over a hundred years."

"Perhaps it was the moon?"

"That *would* be a miracle! No moon through all this cloud."

We returned quickly to the cheerful, candlelit dining room under the roof.

It was midnight before, equipped with a spare toothbrush and an old pair of Diana's pyjamas, I was shown to a small spare room on the floor below.

"Hope you'll be all right in here. We'd better aim for eight o'clock breakfast. Suit you? Right then, sleep well!"

It had been a long day, and I had hardly been able to keep my eyes open for the last hour, but as soon as I reached this little room I knew I was in for a sleepless night. My mind went into unwelcome overdrive. Schemes for the repair of the stairs were uppermost, but speculation as to the possible history of the little box and its pathetic contents followed close behind. I got out of bed, drew the curtains, and looked out across the park. The moon appeared briefly through a rent in the cloud, and a flight of mallards whipped swiftly across this luminous patch.

"And there is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon."

I wasn't so sure about that!

I climbed back into bed and the unwelcome thought came to me that I needed to make a last dash to the bathroom. I made my reluctant way onto the landing trying to remember where on earth the bathroom was and thankful for the torch that Nicholas had handed me. On my return I was, still more reluctantly, drawn to peer down into the darkness below, prodded by a childish element of self-challenging bravado.

A door opened and shut and a dim figure on the floor below slipped under the stairs and out of sight.

"There *is* somebody down there! Somebody *has* got locked in. A cleaner perhaps? But surely the whole place is covered with move-

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ment detectors? Who the hell's that?"

My question was answered by a sigh from below and an indistinguishable gabble of words in a female voice. The words ended in a rack of sobbing and I was much afraid.

A shaft of light broke from a suddenly opened door on the floor above and the Wemysses peered down over the balustrade.

"Ellie?"

"Yes?"

"Did you hear that?"

"Yes. There's somebody down there. I thought there was."

"Can't be," said Nicholas. "Can't be."

They hurried down and joined me. I was very glad of their nearness. The house was desperately cold.

"We heard someone on the stairs," said Diana.

"That was me going to the loo."

"No, before that. Did it wake you up?"

"No, I wasn't asleep. But I saw someone just now . . . And there—look there!"

The tail of a shaft of passing moonlight seemed again to illuminate a dim figure and once again we heard that mutter of pathetic sobbing.

"Come on, Ellie," said Nicholas. "Let's go and look at this."

"You're not leaving me up here by myself," said Diana.

There was a hiss, a whirr, and a metallic click, and, after a moment of aged hesitation, an ancient clock struck one.

"If I might make rather a folksy suggestion," I said, "would we all like a cup of tea?"

"Now that's what I really appreciate," said Nicholas. *"The sheeted dead did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets,* and the architect calls for a cup of tea!"

"What did Johnny Bell say?" asked Diana when we sat down in the kitchen, fragrant mugs of Earl Grey clutched in shaking hands. "That the coffin must have been put in when the staircase was constructed? Sixteen sixty-two. Then perhaps Mr. Stillingfleet can help us."

"Mr. Stillingfleet?" I asked. "Who's he?"

"Was. Hugo Benedict Stillingfleet. Tutor to the little Easton boys."

"Wicked Easton?"

"Yes, William and his brother Robert. He was also chaplain and finally steward. He lived here for about fifty years and kept the most wonderful account books—more like a diary, really. Every farthing that got spent, he recorded it. Everyone who was in the employ of the family and what they earned . . . family journeys, who came to stay and practically what they had for breakfast! If

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anything funny happened when the staircase was being installed, I bet Stillingfleet has recorded it. Nick, go and get Stillingfleet!"

"I'm not getting Stillingfleet at this time of night! Weighs about a ton and I'm not going down there to unlock the library! It'll keep until morning."

"That coffin," I said drowsily. "That secret little box. Did we release something? Something very small. Something very sad. Did we call back somebody? Somebody who is distressed by the disturbance?"

"We'll ask Stillingfleet in the morning," said Diana, and we finally went to bed.

It was a week before I could return to Felthorpe Hall. Johnny Bell was doing a beautiful job on the stairs, and it was nearing completion. The little box still stood safely on the table in the drawing room.

Diana and Nicholas were very subdued. "We've had terrible nights," they said. "The same mutterings and sobbings every night since we disturbed that box! Haven't slept for a week. We don't know what to do. But we've a lot to tell you!"

They led me into the library where the central table was covered in pages of notes and several leather-bound and ancient books. With barely suppressed excitement Diana went straight into the result of her researches. "This is sixteen sixty-one," she said, one finger on her notes and turning the ponderous pages of the Stillingfleet papers with the other hand. "Here's the boss telling him to get estimates for 'Ye newe westerne stair.' And here's 'Jas. Holbrooke, Master Carpenter,' riding out from Norwich to give his estimate—'£482.9.2d.' Expensive!

"And here we are in sixteen sixty-two. A lot of comings and goings. The family were here for nearly all that year. Lots of company. Ate them out of house and home. Bills for barrels of oysters, anchovies, game birds by the dozen brace, cakes and sweetmeats, sacks of coffee . . . John Fox and his brother Will taken up for pilfering at the Lammas Fair and the good Stillingfleet goes over to the assizes to plead for them. Successfully, obviously, because they were back on the payroll the next month. And here's one Jayne Marston."

Diana paused.

"Is she important?"

"Oh yes, we think so," said Nicholas.

"Jayne Marston—'Miss Comfort's abigail.'"

"Abigail? A lady's maid, you mean?"

"Yes, quite posh. Comes down from London and—note this—without her mistress. And that's odd. This was January. Season still in full swing in the capital. Miss Comfort wouldn't have sent

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her abigail down to the country for no good reason."

"Does Stillingfleet give us a clue?"

"Sort of. He refers to her quite often—and affectionately." She quoted, "'Ye sorrowful Jayne . . . That forlorn wretch . . . That sweet slut in her sorrow . . .' Something wrong there, don't you think? And then the staircase gets under way. And in April they start getting ready for a party. Seems to be a belated celebration of the restoration of Charles the Second—the Eastons were all stout monarchists. Economically, they are planning to run it with the celebrations for Robert's engagement to Mary Chandler. Then, in June, two or three things happen—'Did wait on his Lordship under God's guidance and besought him to remember his Creator in the days of his youth, when the evil days come not.'"

"That would be William he was beseeching. And did he remember his Creator? Did he do what Stillingfleet wanted?"

"It doesn't say, but one rather infers not. And then—dismay and disaster—on the fifteenth of June—'To me at dawn this day comes the swanward early. Jayne Marston, God receive her, found drowned in ye lake.'"

Diana turned to me, wide-eyed. "And she's not in the burial register! She's not buried in the churchyard!"

"Suicide, then? Denied a Christian burial."

"Looks like it. And then William disappears."

"Disappears?"

"Yes—'. . . raging to London,' leaving poor old Stillingfleet to unscramble the party. Sounds as though there was the most almighty family row going on."

"And the staircase?"

"Finished. Here—'Thanks be to God!' Then—and this is where the fun starts—'"Twas as though the Devil himself wailed about the house this night and these seven days past. God bless us all.'"

"Is that what it's been like for *you?*"

"Yes. Sobs rather than wails, perhaps, but going on and on. Just the same for Stillingfleet. At the end of every day he wrote just two words—'No change'—until we get to: 'All day working in pursuit of my resolve.'"

"Working? Working at what, I wonder?"

"Well, in addition to his other accomplishments, Mr. Stillingfleet was a carpenter and turner, and he made tables and chairs, and he was a bit of a scientist, too. He had a workshop. We think it was the little room at the end of the stillroom passage."

"What do you think he was working at? The coffin?"

"Yes, that's what we think. A secret burial for a tiny child. A child who must have been illegitimate, inconvenient, disposable. Infanticide was sadly common in those days, and the rubbish heaps of London, certainly, were where the bodies ended up in

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large numbers, but this child was different. He was special to someone. Someone who was determined to grant him as decent a burial as was possible in adverse circumstances."

"It's a long shot, and we'll never know for certain," said Diana, "but listen—Jayne Marston is sent down to the country estate from London without her mistress. Pregnant?"

"If this is her baby, and it was born in June," I said, hurriedly calculating, "she would have been three months gone in January and just beginning to show. . . . Yes, the right moment to send her into obscurity. But is this consistent? Is that what the family would have done? Wouldn't they have just turned her out of the house?"

"I don't think so—not then. This wasn't the Protectorate, this was the Restoration. Cavalier politics and Cavalier morality. Cavalier kindness, if you like. And all the evidence from Stillingfleet is that the Eastons treated their servants with consideration. He was himself almost part of the family. They couldn't have functioned without him. But suppose I'm right. Suppose Jayne comes down to Norfolk because she's pregnant. Suppose Wicked William is the father. Suppose he comes down for the party and takes no notice of her, or spurns her, and perhaps that was what Stillingfleet was begging him to remember, begging him to do something for the wretched girl. Then the baby is born and is stillborn? Or dies, perhaps?"

"Dies? How? And where?"

"We'll never know," said Diana slowly. "Let's just say the baby dies. The body must have been hidden away. There is no recorded death of an infant at that time. Perhaps Jayne, at the death of her child, goes demented and throws herself into the lake?"

"Did she fall, or was she pushed?"

"I'm sure Stillingfleet knew, but he's not saying. Loyalty to the family. It was only a servant involved, I know, but this was an isolated community where a scandal would have torn through the county, and don't forget that most people up here were still rigidly puritan in their outlook. William would have had a bad time of it if it had come out."

"At any rate, there was no Christian burial for Jayne's child, no baptism even, and this would have been a horrifying thing for the mother. The child would have been condemned to eternal perdition."

"And this is when the nightly wailing starts?"

"Yes. But Stillingfleet knows what to do. He makes a little coffin. He places the body inside with a copy of the words from the family motto. . . ."

"Wait a minute, though—It's not quite the right wording, is it? Look at the third word. The motto is *'Deus tute me spectas.'* It

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should say 'me.' 'Thou, Lord, see'st me,' but this says *'eum.'* 'Him.' God sees *him.* Who?"

"I thought it might mean 'God watch over him'—the child, that is."

"No. *'Spectas.'* It doesn't mean look out for in the sense of watching over, it means see, look at."

"Well, I think this is as close as he dares get to an identification, a direct link with the Eastons. And one night, as the staircase is nearly finished, he fixes it up under a floorboard, replaces the floorboard, and says a burial service over it. It was the best he could do."

"Any more from the diary?"

"Only this, but significantly—'Under the hand of God, I pray, I finish my work, and, all praise to Him, a quiet night at last.'"

We sat for a moment in silence. "I bet that was it, or something very like that," I said. "All quiet until I came along with a nail bar. What do we do now?"

"I've been thinking about this," said Diana. "Look, Johnny is still here working on the stairs . . . do you think we could just put it back again? Say a few words, perhaps?"

"Yes, I'm sure we could do that," I said.

We laid it back in its place and Johnny tapped nails back into position through the rim the thoughtful Hugo Stillingfleet had left for this purpose. The new nails sank in easily. We stood back and looked at each other uncertainly.

"May he rest in peace and light perpetual shine upon him," said Diana quietly and clearly.

But something was worrying me. We had worked out a solution of sorts to an intriguing puzzle, but I hadn't heard that satisfying click as the last piece of the jigsaw falls into place. We had heard the truth, I was sure, from Stillingfleet, but had we heard the *whole* truth? I didn't think so.

I went to look again at the Easton portraits. I remembered Nicholas had said he would like to interrogate them. Well, why not? I thought I knew the right questions to ask, and I thought Peter Lely and his unknown pupil had given their subjects a voice which could still be heard over the years. I had released something which had lain dormant but only just contained through the years, and now I believed it was calling out for resolution and justice. The Norfolk police weren't interested in knowing who had committed infanticide and possibly a second murder all those years ago, but *I* was.

I managed to evade the hypnotic stare of Wicked William and concentrated first on the sunny opulence of the wedding portrait. Robert and Mary. Even the names were reassuringly solid. Follow-

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ing the painter's clues, I knew that this couple had married in the autumn; their betrothal, according to Stillingfleet, had been in the summer of 1662, and presumably Robert had been pursuing this heiress during the previous London season. At the very time Jayne Marston had been sent away to the country. Had he known the sorry story of his sister Comfort's maid? It was a family with a reputation for largeheartedness in its dealings with its retainers. Yes, he would have known. He would have been concerned. But concerned, perhaps, for another reason.

Mary's fortune had saved the family and guaranteed his position in society. Robert would not have welcomed any breath of scandal to do with the family his golden goose was about to marry into. "Of Quaker stock," Nicholas had said. I looked again at the heart-shaped face, framed by wispy golden tendrils, the modest dress, the tightly pursed lips, and I wondered about Mary.

"Was it to avoid offending you," I murmured, "that Jayne and her child were done away with? Too inconvenient, too vocal. A servant, yes, but so intertwined with the family she had forgotten her place and was making herself a nuisance? Would it have ruined Robert's schemes if you'd discovered that his brother had seduced a family maid?"

I couldn't believe that.

"And why did you flee?" I asked, turning at last to William. "Why didn't you just tough it out?" An earldom, the king's supporters back in power again—the future looked good for William Easton. What was he fleeing? Not a family scandal—there must have been something more.

The dark eyes taunted, enticed, seduced. I speculated again about the identity of the unknown painter and was struck by a devastating thought. A thought so obvious and yet so shocking I groped my way to a Chippendale chair and, against all the house rules, sat down on it. The painter's message now screamed out at me. How could I not have seen it before?

I heard Nicholas leaving the library and called out to him.

"Ellie? You okay?" He hurried to join me.

"We've got it all wrong, Nicholas!" I said. "Come and have a look again at Wicked William. He's been wrongly accused! It couldn't have been him!"

I positioned Nicholas in front of the portrait. "Now, imagine you're the painter. And that, of course, in the sixteen sixties, means you're a *man*. The sitter is reacting to *you*. What do you see?"

"Oh my God!" said Nicholas. "I see it! And to think that all these years women have been averting their eyes thinking he was trying to seduce *them*. He wasn't at all, was he?"

"No. I'm not sure they had a word for it in Cavalier England, but

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this chap was gay and proud of it, you'd say."

"I'm certain they didn't have a word for it in north Norfolk! And it was a capital offence at the time. 'Death without mercy,' according to the Articles passed by Parliament in sixteen sixty-one. He could, technically, have been executed if discovered."

"What if he *were* discovered?" I speculated. "Caught *in flagrante* with a handsome young painter, let's say?"

"He'd have had to flee to somewhere more worldly—to France . . . to Italy . . . Poor old Stillingfleet, holding all this together! But this is just guesswork, Ellie."

"Oh yes. But look at his hand, Nick! Do you see the flower he's holding?"

Nicholas peered at the tiny purple face.

"Always assumed it was a violet, but it's not, you know! It's heartsease. Common little English flower. It's got lots of names—love-lies-bleeding, love-in-idleness, la pensée in French, wild pansy."

"Exactly! Pansy! A badge. The seventeenth-century equivalent of a pink ribbon. That's what you'd call flaunting it! So how likely is it that he'd be spending time in London undoing a lady's maid? Possible, I suppose—but I can't see it! No. I think we've got to look elsewhere for the father of that little scrap in the coffin."

Our eyes turned on Robert's handsome countenance. I waved a hand at his line of progeny. "It's pretty obvious in which direction *his* preferences lay!" I said with more than a touch of bitterness. "And he had such a lot to lose if his puritan bride-to-be were to catch him with his hand up a maid's skirt! Mary doesn't look the understanding kind to me!"

I looked at the pair in disgust. Their faces had taken on a cast of smug respectability. Their innocent children, healthy and happy, had thrived perhaps at the expense of that other unwanted child.

Suddenly I found myself playing the role of judge in this case that would never come to court and I knew what was required of me. I knew the formula that would ensure undisturbed nights for Diana and Nicholas.

I spoke aloud to the portrait and to anyone else who was listening on the stairs. "Robert Easton, I find you guilty of infanticide," I said simply. "May God have mercy on your soul."

"Deus tute eum spectas," said Diana, who had come silently to join us. "God has seen him. God knows what he has done."

A week later Charles waved a postcard at me.

"Not much in the post. It's for you from some boyfriend of yours in Norfolk. A picture of a bloke in a periwig and it says, 'Thank God! At last a quiet night! Eternally grateful, love, Nicholas.' What *did* you get up to in Norfolk, Ellie?" ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

Searching for Sammy Sand

by Edward D. Hoch

It was Bishop Xavier himself who'd announced the news to Father Noone just a month earlier. "David, as you know, Holy Trinity is going to be closed for six months during renovations. You'll be helping out in other parishes, but I'm wondering if you could take on another assignment as well."

The battle over renovations to the fine old church had been a long one, hard-fought by both sides. In the end, of course, the bishop's side had won out. A more modern Holy Trinity would reopen in six months (or longer) and Father Noone only hoped the disaffected parishioners would return to it. "I'd be happy to take on any assignment," he told the bishop.

"Good! With the shortage of priests we've had to eliminate our chaplain at the county jail. I was hoping you could fill in there for six months, hearing their confessions, saying Mass on Sunday

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mornings, and generally doing whatever you can to help out. Many of the prisoners have family problems, as you can imagine. A priest can comfort them, and often direct their families to Catholic Charities or one of the nondenominational agencies."

"I'll do what I can," Father Noone responded. He could hardly promise less when he'd taken leave the previous year to serve as a temporary chaplain for circus performers.

The county jail was located near the center of downtown, a large modern structure less than a decade old, built with state money when the toughened drug laws brought a rash of arrests. Prisoners were held there while awaiting arraignment and trial. Sentences of no longer than a year could be served there, too. The warden was a retired politician named Aaron Richter who wanted to spend his declining years seated in a comfortable leather chair.

One of the seldom-employed Ed Hoch series characters, Father David Noone was originally conceived on the model of G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown. Noone's debut case was published exactly forty years ago. The Noone series is far from the coziest in the Hoch inventory; in fact, Noone enters the mean streets —the pool halls and drug houses of the inner city—in his latest tantalizing adventure.

"Good to have you aboard, Father Noone," he said, greeting him with a politician's firm handshake. "I'm really delighted that Bishop Xavier was able to free you up. These people could stand a little more God."

Father Noone smiled. "Couldn't we all?"

"I'll notify the prisoners that you'll be available. What hours would you suggest?"

"How about Mass at eight on Sunday mornings, before breakfast?"

"Seven-thirty would be better if it's not too early for you, Father."

"No, no, that's fine. And I can be available Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons for counseling or confessions."

They agreed on hours, and the necessity for prisoners to make appointments for the sessions with Father Noone. He would meet with them in a small interrogation room that was just off the mess hall. "No hidden microphones," Warden Richter promised with a smile. "You'll have complete privacy."

"That's good," Father Noone agreed. "I don't imagine conversations with one's clergyman could be admitted into a trial anyway."

He started off with Mass the following Sunday morning, attended by twenty-eight prisoners. After the service several of them signed up for counseling sessions during the week. The first

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few appointments the following afternoon proved to be fairly routine. Two of them wanted to be released on bail while awaiting their trials. He told them they would have to talk to their lawyer or public defender. Another had a pregnant girlfriend who needed welfare assistance.

It wasn't until Wednesday that he met Roger Colone. His problem was a familiar one among prisoners. "I'm innocent, Father. I know you hear that from all of us, but it's true in my case. I'm charged with killing a police officer when I was twenty miles away at the time, at another place I own south of here."

"Suppose you tell me about it, Roger," he suggested.

"I own a couple of houses in the inner city. I suppose I've been a little lax in checking on my tenants, but I sure didn't know one of my places had become a drug house. You probably read in the papers about the cop who got killed by a booby trap in my place."

It did sound vaguely familiar, something that stuck in his memory in the midst of the city's weekly killings. "Something about a bomb in the refrigerator?"

"That's the one, Father. There've been a lot of home invasions in the inner city, one gang trying to hijack drugs from another gang. Sometimes the drug houses are booby-trapped, especially when nobody's home to watch the place. The refrigerator often contains chemicals used to manufacture synthetic drugs. This tenant of mine on Hickory Street apparently fixed a hand grenade so that opening the refrigerator door pulled the pin on it. The cop tried to shut the door but he wasn't fast enough."

"How did they rig up something like that?" David asked out of curiosity.

"They got ways, Father. I guess they drilled a hole in the back of the refrigerator and used a wire to hold the grenade taut after they'd glued another wire between the door and the grenade's pin."

"Even after the pin is pulled, grenades don't explode for eight or ten seconds, do they? Wouldn't the officer have had time to slam the door or duck out of the way of the blast?"

"Whoever planted it loosened the refrigerator bulb so the light wouldn't come on. By the time he saw the grenade it would have been too late."

"If there was a tenant on the property, why did they charge you with the murder?"

Roger Colone shook his head sadly. "Because I did a dumb thing! I spent a load of money renovating the place six months ago and I was so anxious to get a return on my investment that I rented it to a Jamaican named Sammy Sand without having him sign a lease or anything. It was sort of under the counter, if you get what I mean. He paid me seven hundred a month for the house and I didn't bother reporting the income."

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"You can't prove he was living there?"

Another shake of the head. "The house on one side is empty, and on the other side there's an eighty-year-old woman, Mrs. Anthony, who's half blind and never goes out. When the cops questioned her she just grumbled about what's happened to the old neighborhood."

"Across the street?"

A shrug this time. "Parking lot for one of those giant drugstores. Nobody sees anything. Neighbors down the street think my place was a drug house, but I'm the only name anyone knows. The cops say it must have been me planted that booby trap."

David thought about it. "This man Sammy Sand has to be somewhere. If he could be found, maybe they could prove he lived there by testing his DNA against objects in the house—hairbrush, toothbrush, water glass."

"Hey, you coulda been a detective, Father! Maybe you can find him for me."

"That's a job for the police."

"I been in here a month now and they haven't found him yet. The case is going to the grand jury."

"What about your attorney? Perhaps he could hire a private detective."

"That costs money, Father. Couldn't you just ask around a few places? Somebody must know where the guy is, and they might be more willing to talk with a priest."

"He may have left town after that booby trap killed a police officer." He thought about it and admitted, "I have one or two people I might ask. You say he's Jamaican?"

Colone nodded. "Tall fellow, speaks with one of those nice English accents. Wears a gold earring in his right lobe. He hasn't been here long."

"Is he part of a gang?"

"How should I know? I'm not involved with drugs."

"If you own houses in the area you must have some idea of what goes on."

He shrugged. "I hear there's a Colombian mob been moving in, and there might be a Jamaican mob, too, for all I know. The Colombians been pulling some of those home invasions. I suppose that's who Sammy rigged the booby trap against, only he got a cop by mistake."

They talked a bit longer and David promised to do what he could.

Police headquarters was in a building adjoining the county jail. David had met a detective named Spears during a murder investigation the previous May. Now, hurrying through an early November snowfall between the buildings, he wondered if the detective would even remember him.

"Father Noone, isn't it?" Spears asked as he entered the squad

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room. "We met out at the college last spring."

"You have quite a memory, Detective."

"It goes with the job. What can I do for you today?" Spears was a short, serious type, middle-aged and running a bit toward stocky. David had taken a liking to him when they met before. Now he related the prison session with Roger Colone and asked if there was any information about the missing Sammy Sand.

"He's only missing if he ever existed," Spears replied. "The folks on the street claim they never heard of him, and there's no arrest record on him."

"Colone claims he was newly arrived from Jamaica and was paying cash to rent the house."

The detective shook his head. "We got a cop dead, Father. Nice young guy named Patrick O'Shea. He was the first one into that house and he was alone in the kitchen when the booby trap went off. Somebody's got to pay for that, and right now there's no one but Colone to take the fall. Hell, it was his house."

"What brought Officer O'Shea there in the first place?"

"He collared a street punk named Gomez with a baggie of crack cocaine. Said he bought it at the Hickory Street address. O'Shea got a warrant and went there with a couple of officers from the narcotics squad."

"Has the case gone to the grand jury yet?"

"Next week, I hear."

"I'll ask around the neighborhood. Perhaps they'll be more willing to talk to a priest."

"Don't go taking your position as the prison chaplain too seriously, Father," Spears advised.

David smiled. "Why not, Detective? Chesterton wrote that Father Brown once served as chaplain in a Chicago prison. Maybe I can learn something from it the way he did."

When David Noone reached Hickory Street on Thursday morning another brief snowfall had just ended, leaving only a dusting on the streets and grass. The drug house was boarded up, with scorch marks showing over some windows. The house of the elderly neighbor seemed almost identical from outside, though it had white vinyl siding and a cared-for look. A red Saturn was parked in the driveway. He tried there first and was surprised when the door was opened by an attractive brown-haired woman in her twenties wearing a sweatshirt and jeans. "Can I help you?"

"Hello, I'm Father David Noone. I wonder if I could speak with Mrs. Anthony."

"That's my grandmother," the young woman told him. "I'm Fern Anthony. She's not very well and I try to stop by every day. Could you tell me what this is about?"

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"A police officer was killed in the house next-door."

"I know. This neighborhood—"

"I'm trying to locate a man named Sammy Sand who was living there."

"I never saw anyone around but we can ask her. Come along." She led the way down a hall to a first-floor bedroom where an elderly woman sat in a chair by the window. David saw at once that it was the window facing Colone's house.

Fern introduced him to her grandmother and explained the reason for his visit. "Mrs. Anthony, the owner of the house says it was being rented by a Jamaican named Sammy Sand. I was wondering if you might have seen him over there."

"The police already asked me," she told him. "I sit here by the window during the day, but you know, I doze off. When it gets dark I close the drape and watch TV. I never saw anyone around during the day."

"How about you?" David asked the young woman.

She shook her head. "I come here to tend to Grandma, not watch the neighbors. When I'm out of my car I look straight ahead and don't speak to anyone. I didn't even know the people who used to live there, when it was still a decent neighborhood."

"Then neither of you would have noticed any unusual activity, especially at night?" David expected any drug activity would have been mainly after dark.

"No," Fern Anthony said, and the old woman shook her head.

He glanced out at the boarded windows directly opposite. "Is that the dining room?"

"No," Fern told him. "The houses are mirror images of each other, but they knocked out a wall and enlarged the living room. That would be part of it."

"Mrs. Anthony, you must have heard the explosion a couple of weeks ago, when the police officer was killed."

"I heard it," Mrs. Anthony assured him. "It was in the late afternoon. Woke me out of a sound sleep. That's when the police came and asked me questions."

"They said in the papers it was a hand grenade," Fern said. "Where would anyone get hold of something like that?"

"Sometimes veterans bring them back from the war, smuggle them in. Or someone steals them from an army base in this country. They're not that hard to come by."

"How does a priest know something like that?" Mrs. Anthony wondered.

David Noone laughed. "People tell me things." As he was leaving he asked Fern for her phone number in case he had more questions.

She jotted it down for him. "This is my apartment. I don't have a cell phone."

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"Fine. I probably won't need it. Do you come here about the same time each day?"

She nodded. "Usually in the morning. I have an afternoon job at a day-care center."

He left them and walked across the street to the drugstore. As in most neighborhoods, its windows were equipped with steel shutters to pull down and lock when the place was closed. The cashier was a pretty young girl not long out of high school. Her nametag identified her as Charlene and he recognized the class ring from St. Bridget's. "How can I help you, Father?" she asked.

"I'm trying to locate a man who lived across the street, a dark-skinned Jamaican with a British accent. I believe his name is Sammy Sand."

She nodded. "I used to see him sometimes when I worked the evening shift. He'd come running over for something. I don't know his name, but all the girls thought he was handsome."

Finally, a possibility that the man did exist. David said a silent prayer. "What sort of things did he buy?"

"Oh, cigarettes usually." Blushing prettily, she added, "And condoms."

"Did you ever notice anyone else over there?"

She glanced through the window at the boarded-up house. "Women, occasionally. They usually came by at night. He was popular, I guess. I never noticed anyone over there during the day."

"Have you seen him lately?"

She shook her head. "Not since the police officer was killed."

"Thanks," he said with a smile. "You've been a big help."

"Glad I could help, Father."

He left the drugstore wondering why the police hadn't turned up this witness. Probably they'd come by once and only talked to the cashiers on duty. But knowing Sammy Sand probably existed didn't bring David any closer to finding him.

His next stop was a neighborhood bar and poolroom frequented by Hispanics. He knew a few of them from his parish and sought out one named Hildago. The man was short and stocky, and seemed to have been born with a pool cue in his hand. "Want a game, Father?" he asked as soon as he saw David.

"No time today. I was wondering if any Colombians come in here."

"Sure, sometimes." His face lost its smile. "What you want, Father?"

"I just have some questions. I'm looking for a Jamaican named Sammy Sand and I heard he might have had a run-in with the Colombians."

Hildago lowered his voice. "About drugs?"

"Maybe."

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He thought for a moment and said, "You wait until after lunch. Have a sandwich or something. A man is coming later who might know something. But you'll probably have to shoot a game with him while you talk."

David was in no hurry so he followed Hildago's advice and ordered a corned-beef sandwich and a beer. It was just after one when a tall man with greased-down black hair and a thin moustache came through the door, wearing a flashy electric-blue suit. He seemed to scan the bar and pool table as if looking for trouble but apparently found none. He ignored the priest eating the last of his sandwich and walked over to join Hildago at the pool table. David finished the beer he'd ordered with the sandwich, laid some money on the bar, and walked over there, too.

"You know Father Noone?" Hildago asked the newcomer, doing his job.

"Who?"

"David Noone. He's one of the good guys. Father, I want you to meet Garcia Cucuta."

David noticed the bulge under the man's left armpit but shook his hand nonetheless. "Pleased to meet you."

Cucuta eyed him up and down, taking in the Roman collar, and seemed to relax a bit. "Yo, Father. You come here to shoot a game?" he asked, gesturing toward the pool table.

"I'll go a game if we can talk while we play."

"Why not?" Hildago racked up the balls for them and Cucuta allowed David the break. He scattered the fifteen balls without sinking any. Cucuta called the 14-ball in the corner pocket and sank it easily. He followed with the 7-ball and the 2-ball before missing a shot.

"You're pretty good," David conceded. "You know a Jamaican named Sammy Sand?"

Cucuta carefully chalked his cue while David sank the 15-ball with a carom shot. "You learn that in church?" he asked.

"That and lots more. You know Sammy?"

A shrug. "Heard the name."

"I hear the Jamaicans and the Colombians don't get along too well."

He scowled at David. "You talkin' drugs, man! I don't fool with that."

David sank two more balls. "It's important that I find Sammy Sand. This isn't about drugs. Not directly, anyway."

"He came here from the island with a girl, name of Rosie Blanc. Find her, you find him."

"How do I go about that?" He tried to sink the 6-ball in a side pocket but missed.

Cucuta took over and quickly sank all the remaining balls

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before answering the question. "She dances at Captain Kidd's. It's not the kind of place a priest goes to, though."

"Thanks for the tip."

David went back to the rectory, stopping briefly to converse with the workers busy with the church renovations. He answered a few phone messages before dinner and then changed into his turtleneck sweater and leather jacket. "Going out on the town, Father?" his housekeeper asked.

"It's business," he assured her. "About one of the prisoners I'm counseling at the jail."

Captain Kidd's was an inner-city social club catering to a Puerto Rican and West Indian clientele. It featured scantily clad dancers in pirate costumes on a narrow stage behind the bar. Glancing up at the four girls on stage at the moment, David ordered a beer and told the burly bald bartender, "I'm looking for Rosie Blanc. Is she working tonight?"

"They can't date the customers," the man said, setting a foaming beer in front of him and taking his money.

"I just want to talk to her. I think we have a mutual friend."

"Who would that be?"

"Sammy Sand."

"Don't know him." He wiped the bar with a damp rag and moved on.

"What about Rosie?" David called after him.

"Comes on at ten o'clock."

David couldn't imagine himself standing at that bar for two hours. He finished the beer and went back to his car. As he unlocked the door he suddenly tensed, aware that someone had followed him out. "I heard you askin' about Sammy Sand," the voice behind him said, a bit too close for comfort.

David turned, confronting a bearded man with bad teeth. "That's right. Do you know him?"

"I can get you what you need," he told David.

"Who are you?"

"Name's not important. What do you need?"

"I—uh—"

"Coke? H?"

David tried to explain. "I don't want drugs. I'm a priest."

The bearded man snickered. "Sammy don't need no priest."

"Just tell me where I can find him."

"For all I know, he could be dead now. I'm taking over his business. You deal with me or you don't deal at all. I can supply anything you need. Understand?"

"How about synthetic drugs, LSD, Ecstasy, things like that? Did Sammy make any of those?"

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"Hell no! He was a drug dealer, not a chemist."

"I still want to find him. What's your name?"

The man's hand came up holding a spring knife. Its point pressed against David's throat. "Just ask for Foxy. I'm here most nights."

"I was looking for Sammy's girlfriend, Rosie Blanc. They said she dances here."

His face took on a bit of a leer. "You a priest lookin' for Rosie? My, my! She's not his girl anymore. He had himself a white chick last I heard."

"Look, Foxy, I don't want drugs and I don't want women. This is about that police officer who got blown up at the house Sammy was renting."

"Don't know anything about that," he said, removing the knife from David's throat and stepping away. "Watch your step, priest. If you really are one."

The encounter had shaken David a bit. He realized the search for Sammy Sand was taking him into unknown territory, dangerous territory. He drove back to the rectory with every intention of canceling his return visit to Captain Kidd's.

"Not much of a night out," his housekeeper remarked, looking up from the television.

"No indeed, Maggie. I think I'll turn in early."

But it was easier said than done. He read for a while and found himself glancing at the clock about every quarter-hour. At ten o'clock he put down the book and took his leather jacket from the closet. Maggie was already dozing in her chair and didn't hear him go out.

Captain Kidd's was crowded for a Thursday night, but perhaps it was like that every night. He saw at once that the four girls on stage were a different team. Two seemed Asian, and he guessed that the darker of the other two might be Jamaican. The bartender confirmed that she was Rosie Blanc.

"Could I speak with her during her break?" David asked.

"They can't date the customers," he said, repeating his line from earlier.

"I just want to ask her about a friend."

When Rosie Blanc sauntered over to his table she lacked the English accent he'd expected, but admitted that she'd come from Jamaica with Sammy Sand. She seemed quite at ease in her brief stage costume. "What do you want with Sammy?" she asked.

"Just to talk to him. I'm a priest."

She quickly made the sign of the cross, as if to identify herself as a Catholic. "Excuse my outfit, Father. It's part of the act. I don't know where Sammy is. A guy named Foxy says he might be dead."

"Why does he think that?"

"After Sammy and I split up, he got into drugs big-time. He had

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a partner, white or Hispanic. Foxy thinks the partner killed him. That's why nobody's seen him around."

"Maybe Foxy killed him to take over the drug business."

She took a deep breath. "Don't ever say that to him. He carries a knife that's a foot long!"

David wanted to tell her he had first-hand knowledge of Foxy's knife and it wasn't that long. Instead he asked, "Where was Sammy living when you were with him?"

"He was renting a house on Hickory Street. The owner had fixed it up and it wasn't bad at all, nice big living room for entertaining. I'd probably still be there if I didn't come home after work one night and find him in bed with some white bimbo."

"I heard that the women all liked him."

"Yeah. Well, here's one who doesn't anymore."

"Maybe you disliked him enough to kill him," David suggested.

"I won't believe he's really dead till I see his body."

"You know about the explosion at his house last month?"

"Sure. It was all over the TV. Cop got killed."

"Did Sammy ever set any booby traps while you were living there?"

"He wouldn't dirty his hands," she assured him. "If he wanted to kill anyone he'd probably charm them to death."

David wrote down his phone number and handed it to her. "If you ever need any help, Rosie, I'm here for you."

She slipped the piece of paper down the front of her bra. "Thanks, Father. Say a prayer for me." She turned and walked back to the stage. Her break was over.

On Friday morning, back in his collar and black suit, David drove down to police headquarters. He'd said the early Mass at one of the neighboring churches and now there was the matter of Roger Colone. Spears kept him waiting only a few minutes before he appeared from one of the interrogation rooms. "Father Noone! What can I do for you today?"

"I'm still working on this Colone matter. I've found some people who knew Sammy Sand. Whether he's still alive is an open question.

"I don't know what more I can do for you, Father, except offer you a cup of coffee. Want one?"

"I'll pass for now. There is one thing. Could you show me the house on Hickory Street?"

"It's boarded up now. Not safe."

"I'd still like to see it. I'll take my chances."

Spears considered it and checked his calendar. "I have to go out to the airport about something. Hickory Street is on the way. If you want to follow me, I could open the place for five minutes."

"That's all I'd need. I just want to get the feel of it."

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Spears finished his own coffee and led the way to the parking lot. He had an unmarked blue Crown Victoria that was easy for David to follow. The day had turned sunny, melting what little snow remained on the ground. It was late morning when they reached Hickory Street. He half expected to see Fern Anthony's red Saturn in her grandmother's driveway but there was no sign of it.

Detective Spears pulled the yellow crime-scene tape from the door and opened the padlock the police had put on it. "Watch your step here, Father," he cautioned. "The explosion caused a small fire that damaged the downstairs pretty bad."

The door opened on a front hall with the living room on the right and a small dining room on the left. As Fern had said, it was a mirror image of her grandmother's house. The kitchen, where the explosion had occurred, was beyond the dining room, at the rear of the house. David was surprised to see the remains of the refrigerator still standing among the blackened walls and half-collapsed ceiling. Its door had been blown off by the grenade's blast.

"Don't you need this for evidence?" he asked the detective.

"It's been photographed, videotaped, fingerprinted, tested for chemical residue, you name it. As for the house itself, the city will probably tear it down rather than try to rebuild it."

The power had been disconnected, but Spears gave David a flashlight so he could get a better look at the inside of the refrigerator. There was really nothing to see but a blackened, shapeless shell. "Did Officer O'Shea have a flashlight?" he asked Spears.

"Didn't need one. The power was on and he was there with a search warrant. They got a key from the landlord."

"Roger Colone?"

"That's right. When no one answered the door, O'Shea unlocked it and entered the house with the two narcotics agents. They were searching that big living room and he went into the kitchen. Then the place blew up. We found the grenade fragments later, but nothing else. It looked like a hole had been drilled through the back of the refrigerator to set up the booby trap."

"There must have been some evidence that Sammy Sand had lived here."

"Nothing we could find. There were odd fingerprints here and there, but this man Sand—if there is such a man—had no record."

"Clothing?"

"A few things, but they could have been Colone's. Some of the prints match his."

"He owns the place," David argued. "He'd been doing some renovations just a few months ago. That would explain the fingerprints."

"Yeah," Spears agreed, somewhat reluctantly.

Staring at the scorched walls of the living room, a sudden thought came to David. He dug around in his pockets and came up

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with a slip of paper. "Could you call in on your car radio and get me an address for this phone number?"

"Does it have to do with this case?"

"Maybe," was all David would say.

The downtown area had a number of spacious lofts, some abandoned by a manufacturer of sweatshirts and sporting goods that moved to the suburbs a generation earlier. Over the years many of them had been converted into apartments in various price ranges. Young people, especially, seemed to like the high ceilings and large windows with their view of the cityscape. The recent loft-dwellers had even boosted attendance at St. Joseph's, downtown's only Catholic church.

David found the loft that he wanted without difficulty. It was on the fifth floor of a building on South Street, reached by an iron-gated elevator that must have been part of the original structure. Fern Anthony answered the door on his second ring. "Oh, Father Noone! I was just leaving for my day-care job."

"If you could give me five minutes, I'd appreciate it."

"Certainly. Come on in." Casually she asked, "How did you find my place?"

"From the phone number you gave me. Detective Spears checked it out."

She wore a casual sweatshirt and jeans, much as she had the previous day. Seated opposite him across a low coffee table, she took out a cigarette, then thought better of it and returned it to the pack. "You didn't have to ask him. You could have called me for my address."

David smiled at her and replied, quite honestly, "I wanted to surprise you."

"What—?"

"You told me you never saw anyone next-door to your grandmother's, had never been in the house, yet you knew that the living room had been enlarged. That would have happened just before the landlord rented the place to Sammy Sand. Sammy often had women visitors after dark, and his girlfriend caught him in bed with a white woman. Would that have been you, Fern?"

She was breathing hard. "What do you want from me, Father?"

"I want Sammy Sand. I've been searching for him since Wednesday. I've heard he doesn't exist and I've heard he might be dead. If he's alive, and hiding somewhere, I believe it might be with his girlfriend."

That was when her bedroom door opened and he appeared, bare-chested, the earring glistening in his right lobe, pointing an ugly-looking pistol at David's chest. "I'm here," Sammy Sand announced.

Later that afternoon, Roger Colone was brought into the little interrogation room that was serving as the jail chaplain's office.

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"Good to see you, Father. Have you had any luck finding Sammy Sand?"

David nodded. "Sit down and I'll tell you about it." He went quickly through his encounters of the past two days and what he'd learned, climaxing with his discovery of the missing man hiding in Fern Anthony's loft apartment..

"He pulled a gun on you?"

"That's right. I suppose I was foolish to go there without police backup."

"What happened?"

"I talked to him and finally he put down the gun. He's making a statement to Detective Spears right now."

"A confession?"

"Not exactly, no," David answered.

"Well, what's he saying?"

"One of the people I spoke with yesterday told me he had a partner in this drug business. He hasn't been hiding from the police these past weeks. He's been hiding from the partner who tried to kill him. That booby trap was meant for Sammy Sand and I think you're the one who planted it, Roger. He thinks so, too. He was afraid they'd let you out on bail and you'd try to finish the job."

"What?" His face turned red with rage. "You're both crazy!"

"Are we? The person who set the booby trap needed time to drill a hole in the back of the refrigerator. He needed access to the house to place the hand grenade in position. As the landlord, you had a key. In fact, you gave a key to the police officers the night of their raid. You must have been praying they wouldn't open the refrigerator. You could hardly tell them you'd set a booby trap to go off there, so you made sure you were far away from the scene."

"Listen, Father, you've got this all wrong!"

"Have I? You told me about the hole in the back of the refrigerator. Spears might have mentioned that to you, but he couldn't have mentioned about unscrewing the refrigerator light a bit so it wouldn't come on and reveal the booby trap too soon. I saw the inside of that refrigerator and there was nothing left of it. Even the door had been blown off. Only the person who set the trap could have known the bulb had been loosened. You also told me drug dealers sometimes booby-trapped their refrigerators because they stored chemicals in there for making synthetic drugs. But the Colombians knew Sammy wasn't into that. The refrigerator wasn't booby-trapped to kill home invaders. It was booby-trapped to kill Sammy himself when he went in for food or a beer."

Colone took a deep breath and leaned back. The fight seemed to have gone out of him. "I didn't mean to kill a cop," he muttered. "It was an accident. What can you do for me, Father?"

"I can hear your confession," David told him. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

WINNING THE GAME

by Rubem Fonseca

Translated from the Brazilian Portuguese by Clifford E. Landers

Since the 1960s Rubem Fonseca's often violent, totally unsentimental short stories, marked by unstinting realism and sometimes discomfiting emotional honesty, have been capturing the attention of Brazil's reading public. His fiction has been embraced by readers in many other parts of the world as well: Translations of his works have appeared in English, French, German, Spanish, Dutch, and several Scandinavian languages. This is his second appearance in Passport to Crime.

When I'm not reading some book I get from the public library I watch one of those TV programs that show the life of the rich—their mansions, the cars, the horses, the yachts, the jewels, the paintings, the rare furniture, the silverware, the wine cellar, the servants. It's impressive how well served the rich are. I don't miss a one of those programs, even though they're not of much use to me; none of those rich people live in my country. But I enjoyed hearing a millionaire interviewed during a dinner say that he acquired a yacht worth hundreds of millions because he wanted to have a yacht bigger than some other rich guy. "It was the only way to put an end to the envy I felt of him," he confessed, smiling, taking a swallow of the drink in his glass. The dinner companions around him laughed a lot when he said that. The rich can have everything, even envy of each other, and in them it's humorous; with them, everything is amusing. I'm poor, and envy in the poor is looked upon badly, because the poor repress their envy until, eventually, it turns to hatred of the rich; the poor don't know how to retaliate without a spirit of vengeance.

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But I don't feel rage against any rich person; my envy is like the guy's with the bigger yacht: like him, I just want to win the game.

I've discovered how to win the game between a poor guy, like me, and a rich one. Not by becoming rich myself; I'd never manage that. "Getting rich," one of them said on a program, "is a genetic proclivity that not everyone has." That millionaire had made his fortune starting out from zero. My father was poor, and I inherited nothing when he died, not even the gene that motivates you to make money.

The only possession I have is my life, and the only way of winning the game is by killing a rich man and coming away alive. It's something like buying the bigger yacht. I know this seems like odd reasoning, but one way to win the game is by making up at least part of the rules, something the rich do. The rich man I kill has to be an heir; an heir is a person like me, without the predisposition to get rich, but who was born rich and blithely enjoys the fortune that fell from the sky into his lap. Actually, to relish life to the fullest, it's preferable that just the father, and not the heir, be born with the gene.

I would prefer killing one of those foreign rich guys that I see on television. A man. Their wives, or their daughters, are even more ostentatiously rich, but a woman, however many jewels she has on her fingers and around her wrist and neck, isn't the bigger yacht. Nor would I be interested in one of those women who obtained their fortune by working—clones who appear on television in suits—though they are certainly carriers of the gene. No, it would have to be a man. But since the ideal rich men live in other countries, I have to be satisfied looking for one who lives right here, one who inherited the money and goods that he enjoys.

The difficulty in achieving this goal doesn't worry me in the least. I painstakingly draw up my plans and when I lie down I'm asleep within minutes and don't wake up during the night. Not only do I have peace of mind but a well-functioning prostate, unlike my father, who used to get up every three hours to urinate. I'm in no hurry; I must choose with great care, somebody at least at the level of the rich guy who bought the big yacht. The majority of the people who appear in the magazines published here in my country can be called rich and famous, but killing one of them would be easy and wouldn't make me win the game.

Every rich person likes to show off his wealth. The nouveaux riches flaunt it more, but I don't want to kill one of them, I want a rich man who inherited his fortune. These, belonging to the later generations, are more discreet, normally displaying their wealth through travel. They love shopping in Paris, London, New York. They also like to go to distant and exotic places that have good hotels with genteel help, and the more sports-minded can't pass up an annual ski trip, which is understandable because after all

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they do live in a tropical country. They display their wealth among themselves (there's nothing to be gained from playing with the poor), at millionaires' dinners where the winner can confess it was because of envy that he bought what he bought, and the others merrily drink to his health.

A guy like me, white, poor, skinny, and starving, has neither brothers nor allies. It wasn't easy to get a job with the most expensive and exclusive catering service in town. It took deliberate planning and maneuvering; I spent two years at it. Perseverance is the only virtue I possess. The rich had the habit of hiring that catering service when they gave a dinner. The owner, the descendant of an illustrious family—I'm not going to mention her name, just as I'm not going to mention anyone's name, not even mine—was a domineering woman who kept her notes and time charts in a small computer that she carried in a bag over her shoulder. She imposed rigid standards on those who worked for her—cooks, decorators, buyers, waiters, and all the rest. She was so competent that the employees, besides obeying without batting an eye, even admired her. If some employee acted in a way not in keeping with the established model, he was fired. That was rare, because all, before being hired, were subjected to a rigorous selection and training process. We did as we were told, and I was one of the most obedient. And the service charged a small fortune to cook for and feed those rich people. The owner of the catering service had the gene.

Before the evaluation and training to which I submitted to become a waiter at the catering service, I did an apprenticeship of my own. First, I did something about my appearance. I found a good, cheap dentist, which is very rare, and bought some decent clothes. Then, which was more important, I learned, as part of my solitary training, to be a happy servant, as good waiters are. But faking those feelings is very difficult. That subservience and happiness can't be obvious, they must be very subtle, perceived subconsciously by the recipient. The best way of playing that impalpable dissimulation was to create a state of mind that could make me truly happy to be a waiter to the rich, even temporarily. The owner of the catering service pointed me out as an example of the employee who did his job by taking pride in what he did, which is why I was so efficient.

The rich, like the poor, aren't all the same. There are those who like to ramble on with a cigar between their fingers or a glass of precious liquid in their hand, there are those who play the gallant, those who are reserved, the solemn, those who sport their erudition, those who flaunt richness with their designer attire, there are even the circumspect ones, but deep down they're all showoffs; it's part of the pantomime. Which ends up being a true sign language, for it makes it possible to see what each of them really is. I know that the poor also do their pantomime, but the poor

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don't interest me, it's not in my plans to play with any of them; my game is that of the bigger yacht.

I waited patiently for the ideal rich man to come along. I was ready for him. It wasn't easy to get the poison, tasteless and odorless, that I transferred from one pocket to the other in my pilgrimage. But I'm not going to relate the risks I took and the vile things I did to obtain it.

Finally, a rich man of the type I was looking for appeared at the reserved-seating dinner at one of the five tables in the mansion's dining room. I knew his story, but I'd never seen him, not even his photo. It was the owner of the catering service who told me, and for the first time I saw her excited, because "he" had just arrived and I was designated to serve him personally. Rich people like to be well attended. I would remain at a certain distance, without looking at him, but at any gesture of command of his I was to approach and say simply, "Sir?" I knew how to do that very well; I was a happy waiter.

He had arrived, like the other guests, in a bulletproof car, surrounded by bodyguards. He was a short, dark guy, balding, with discreet gestures. His wife, his fourth, was a tall, slim blonde who appeared even taller thanks to the high heels she was wearing.

There were eight guests at each table, four men and four women. Even though the service wasn't French style, each table was attended to by a pair of waiters; my colleague was a tall black man with perfect teeth. There were drinks for every taste, even beer, but I don't remember anyone at my table asking for that vulgar and fattening beverage. As per the owner's instructions, the other waiter was my subordinate. Discreetly, I decided that my colleague would handle the requests of the other diners, who were so engrossed in their conversations that they didn't notice the special treatment I afforded one of them.

I waited on him with perfection. He ate little, drank in moderation. He didn't use, with me, the word "please" or "thanks." His orders were laconic, unaffected. The dinner was nearing its end.

"Sir?" I approached when he turned his head an inch to the side, without looking at anyone, but I knew it was for me.

"Half a cup of coffee."

It was the chance I'd been waiting for.

I went to the kitchen and made the coffee in the state-of-the-art Italian machine supplied by the caterer. I added the poison.

"Here you are, sir."

He sipped the coffee, chatting with the lady beside him. Unhurriedly, I picked up the empty cup, went back to the kitchen, and washed it carefully.

It took some time for them to discover that he was dead, as he had rested his head on his arms on the table and appeared to be sleeping. But since millionaires don't do those things, taking a nap

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at a banquet table, those around him found it odd and realized that something serious had occurred. A heart attack, probably.

There was a commotion, confronted with relevant elegance by the majority of those present, especially his svelte wife. The bodyguards, however, were much more nervous. The dinner was brought to a close shortly after a private ambulance took the corpse away.

I think I'm going to continue serving the rich for a time. It'll have to be another catering service; the one I worked for suffered a reverse of fortune. At first the newspapers said only that the cause of the rich man's death was a sudden illness. But one of the weekly magazines published a long cover story talking about poisoning, with pictures of the guests at the banquet, especially those, men and women alike, about whom malicious insinuations could be made. The life of the dead millionaire, his businesses, his marriages and divorces, especially the scandalous circumstances of one of the latter, were given extensive coverage.

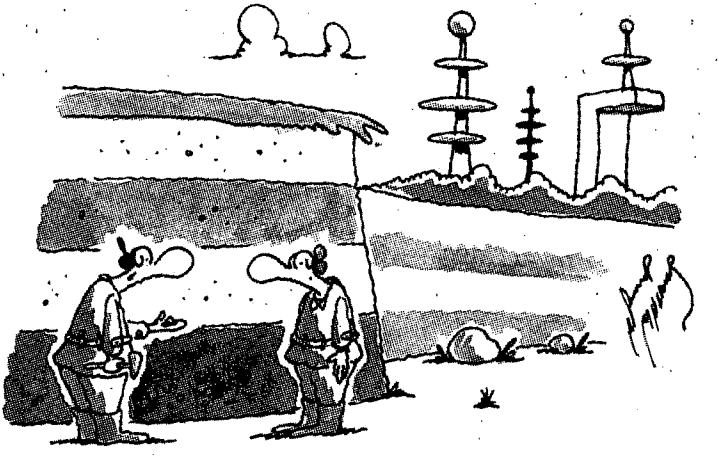
The police are investigating. I enjoyed going to the precinct to make a statement. I wasn't there long; the police thought I couldn't have much to say about poisoning. After all, I was a stupid and happy waiter, above any suspicion. When I was dismissed by the interrogator in charge of the case I said casually, "My yacht's bigger than his."

Someone had to know.

"I told you, we're through here, you can go."

As I was leaving, I heard him tell the recording clerk, "One more shitty statement."

I won the game. I'm uncertain whether I should play again. With envy but without resentment, just to win, like the rich. It's good to be like the rich. ●



"This sedimentary layer seems to consist entirely of shredded Enron documents."

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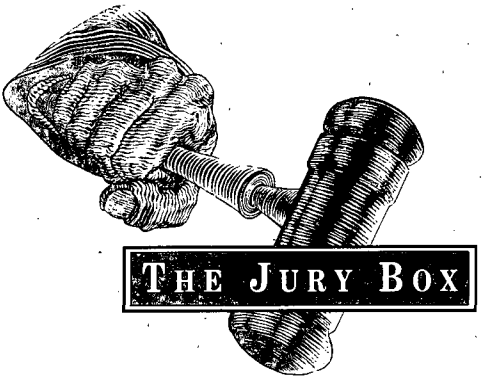

by Jon L. Breen

The two highest awards for lifetime achievement in English-language crime fiction are the Mystery Writers of America's Grand Master, first awarded in 1955 to Agatha Christie, and the Crime Writers Association's Diamond Dagger, first awarded in 1986 to Eric Ambler. While each award has an understandable national bias, MWA has honored no fewer than a dozen British writers, while only three Americans have been given the Diamond Dagger: Ed McBain, Sara Paretsky, and this year's winner, Lawrence Block. McBain and Block join Ambler, Julian Symons, P.D. James, John Le Carré, Michael Gilbert, Ruth Rendell, and Dick Francis as holders of both awards.

The CWA's 50th-anniversary anthology *Mysterious Pleasures* (Little, Brown UK/ Trafalgar, $17.95), edited by Martin Edwards, includes among its 23 contributors McBain, Paretsky, and 14 other Diamond Dagger winners, of whom four contribute intriguing new stories: Robert Barnard ("Everybody's Girl," a Charlie Peace novel-in-miniature), Colin Dexter ("The Double Crossing," not about the departed Chief Inspector Morse but of interest to his fans), H.R.F. Keating (a clever puzzle for Inspector Ghote evocatively titled "The Hound of the Hanging Gardens"), and Peter Lovesey (the sports-minded narrator wonders why the physically unimpressive Willy Plumridge is known as "The Man Who Jumped for England"). Grand Master Edward D. Hoch contributes to another current CWA anthology, *Green for Danger* (Do-Not/ Dufour, $39.95 cloth, $16.95 paper), with an outstanding new story, "The War in Wonderland," set (as seems appropriate in a book named after Christianna Brand's classic novel) in Great Britain during World War II.

Grand Master Tony Hillerman is between novels, but there's a new paperback of his and Ernie Bulow's brief but enlightening

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1991 volume, *Talking Mysteries: A Conversation With Tony Hillerman* (University of New Mexico Press, $13.95).

Below are considered the newest volumes from McBain and Block; Grand Masters Parker, Westlake, and Clark; and Diamond Dagger recipient Keating, plus a first novel that is in part *about* Grand Master Erle Stanley Gardner.

*** Ed McBain: *The Frumious Bandersnatch,* Simon & Schuster, $25. In a very au courant entry in the near-fifty-year-old 87th Precinct series, a young female singer is taken from a yacht filled with music industry insiders by kidnappers wearing Saddam Hussein, Yasir Arafat, and George W. Bush masks. Her interrupted performance, in which Lewis Carroll's nonsense verse is interpreted as describing a rape, reminded me of the Janet Jackson-Justin Timberlake Super Bowl incident, which occurred after this book's publication. Of the two principal surprises, many readers will anticipate one but few the other. The sometimes-modular McBain sticks to one case this time, but fills us in on the continuing literary aspirations of Fat Ollie Weeks and his unlikely romance with a female colleague.

*** Lawrence Block: *The Burglar on the Prowl,* Morrow, $24.95. The latest about Manhattan burglar-cum-bookseller Bernie Rhodenbarr is a comic fugue on a theme of coincidence. The humor extends not just to the brilliant dialogue and the insouciant Archie Goodwin-esque narrative but to the absurdly complicated plot, involving elements as varied as an old house's milk chute, books by Joseph Conrad and Leon Uris, and a conjuring bartender. Block also has some fun with colleague John Sandford, who hasn't really authored a book called *Lettuce Prey.* (I checked Amazon.com to make sure.)

*** Robert B. Parker: *Bad Business,* Putnam, $24.95. Boston private eye Spenser, hired to get the goods on a wandering husband, encounters sexual and corporate malfeasance and, of course, murder. Parker's minor classics *God Save the Child* (1974) and *Mortal Stakes* (1975) were followed by a series of socially significant, always well-written, but seriously underplotted sequels. More recent wisecrack-driven Spenser novels are pure entertainment, less reminiscent of Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald than of old radio shows like Blake Edwards's *Richard Diamond.* Though the cutesy dialogue with series regulars Susan and Hawk may be fingernails on the blackboard for some, the change is a salutary one, especially since it's been accompanied by more complex and devious plotting.

*** Donald E. Westlake: *The Road to Ruin,* Mysterious, $25. The Dortmunder gang plans the theft of a disgraced tycoon's classic cars with the expected

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hilarious results. The farcical interlocking of criminal plots is as adeptly managed as ever, and the barroom theory that air conditioners cause global warming is worth the price of admission all by itself.

** H.R.F. Keating: *A Detective Under Fire,* St. Martin's Minotaur/Dunne, $23.95. In her third case, Detective Superintendent Harriet Martens is dispatched to London to investigate charges of corruption against members of the elite Maximum Crime Squad — though her home department is in the Midlands, she is characterized behind her back (but in her hearing) as a "dozy northern tart." Some interesting plot touches, social insights, and deductive strokes lead up to a good surprise solution, but the excessive repetitiousness and laggardly pace put this one below the author's best.

** Susan Kandel, *I Dreamed I Married Perry Mason,* Morrow, $23.95. While researching a biography of Mason's creator, Cece Caruso becomes involved with a forty-year-old Ventura, California, murder case whose convicted perpetrator wrote a letter to Gardner's Court of Last Resort. A mystery writer biographer as sleuth is a promising idea, and the stuff on Gardner is interesting, but Kandel's first novel is more like a typical jocular, over-detailed, tangent-prone contemporary cozy than a fast-paced Perry Mason. Given a choice, I'd rather read Caruso's Gardner bio.

**** Loren D. Estleman: *Retro,* Forge, $24.95. Detroit's 'forties-nostalgic, out-of-his-time private eye Amos Walker investigates two murders with much in common—but separated by 53 years. The elaborate plot, taking off from a visit to Canada to deliver a deceased madame's cremains to a Vietnam-era draft evader, is a dandy, and as usual the quality of the Chandleresque prose and dialogue is stunning. One character's riff on how the downside of 20th-century progress has made "backward . . . the new forward" is classic. Estleman would be a good choice for a future Grand Master award.

*** Aaron Elkins: *Good Blood,* Berkley, $23.95. Skeleton detective Gideon Oliver's vacation in Italy is of course interrupted when a past murder represented by a set of old bones and a present-day kidnapping beset a wealthy family. With real detection from physical evidence and the author's customary bright dialogue, this is a welcome walk down detective fiction's Main Street. (Gideon must be the Dagwood Bumstead of mystery fiction: You never get the impression he's fat, but he certainly spends a lot of pages eating.)

Editor's Note: Jon L. Breen is not only an award-winning mystery reviewer, he's an acclaimed novelist and short story writer with a new collection of stories recently published by Crippen & Landru Publishers. See *Kill the Umpire: The Calls of Ed Gorgon.*

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The Tonto Plateau

by Kinley Roby

When her husband Sam came home, Gretchen McBride was sitting on the sofa holding a faded yellow maple leaf in her hands, weeping as if her heart was broken. An old brown suitcase with scuffed corners lay open beside her, its contents spilling onto her lap. A few ribbons, cards, and small anonymous objects had tumbled to the floor.

Sam came stamping through the front door, shaking off snow. "I'll bet there's already ten feet on the North Rim," he shouted.

A new writer whose first novel, *Death in a Hammock*, was published by Five Star Press this year, Kinley Roby is a retired chairman of the Department of English at Northeastern University in Boston. Thirty years ago he collaborated with his wife, Mary Roby, on a story published in *AHMM*. This is his first solo short-fiction publication, and it is, we think, a particularly promising debut.

He was a professor of English at Montjoy College, but visiting national parks was his passion, and this year it was going to be the Grand Canyon. Not getting an answer to his greeting, he went to the living room door. He stood there for a moment staring at Gretchen, shaking his big head and pulling off his coat. Sam was big all over, with hands like frying pans. He shambled across the rug, dropping his coat on a chair as he passed.

"Gretch, Gretch," he said in a heavy, patient voice. "What have you done?"

He lowered himself onto the couch beside his wife and pulled her into his arms.

"Oh, Sam," she said, burrowing her head into his shoulder, "I didn't mean to . . . I was trying to remember whether it was Maine or New Hampshire where we stayed in that beautiful old white inn with the four chimneys and the fireplaces in the bedrooms."

"And you thought you'd just look in the suitcase to see if you could find something to remind you," he said, gently rubbing her back.

"Exactly. It was a mistake." She lifted her face.

Sam stared fondly at her. She pushed away, gave him a side-

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wise glance, and laughed.

She suspected he thought of her more often as a daughter than a wife. He was, in fact, old enough to be her father, but for the fifteen years they had been married, he had been a remarkably satisfactory husband.

Until about a year ago, when the yellow leaf and her other treasured objects had suddenly turned on her, made the memories they harbored a misery instead of a joy. It had begun with a small basswood Madonna Sam had bought for her in Quebec. She had kept the carving on her dresser for a year and then put it away in a small box in her sweater drawer. She came upon it while searching for a lost button.

Delighted, she tipped it out of its box into her hand, and found herself standing again on the promenade by the Hotel Frontenac, holding Sam's arm in the wintry sunshine, looking down the somber St. Lawrence, a cold wind stinging her face.

The experience was so intense and her awareness of it so complete that she collapsed in an agony of tears and what she later described to Sam as a devastating sense of loss.

She had tried to explain it more fully to Sam and failed. Giving up, she said, "It was too much to bear. Does it sound crazy?"

"No," he had said with a sigh, drawing her closer. "It's what Emily experienced."

"Who?" Gretchen asked.

"In *Our Town,*" he replied quietly.

"I don't . . ."

"No," he said soothingly. "Never mind."

"I picked it up," she now admitted, waving the leaf at Sam in a gesture of resignation, and smiled ruefully.

Her eyes filled with tears again. She stared at the leaf, feeling that awful sense of loss climbing up through her body.

"Perhaps you should just get rid of it," he said.

Of course! She leaped up and ran across the room, and flung the leaf into the fireplace.

With a sharp, explosive crackle, the flames devoured the leaf and sent its glowing ash winging up the chimney. She sagged with relief. The act had freed her. She rushed back and threw herself into Sam's arms.

"Oh, my love," she cried.

"There, there," Sam said. He struggled to his feet and gently freed himself from her embrace.

He bent and gathered up the fallen odds and ends and dumped them back into the suitcase and closed it. "I'll take this to the attic. Then I'd like some coffee. I'm still chilled through and through."

Gretchen lifted Sam's coat from the chair and carried it into the hall. After hanging it up, she pressed one of the heavy damp

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sleeves against her face and breathed in its cold, familiar smell. Her stomach constricted with the flood of love she felt for him. Frightened, she dropped the sleeve and pushed the door shut. The wave of feeling subsided.

As she made the coffee, Gretchen thought about what she'd done with the leaf and wondered at her daring. Did I, she wondered, do the right thing? It was almost like burning the memory itself.

But the memory was still there and no longer unbearable. Thinking about the inn was even pleasant. Would she have to burn her keepsakes? The coffee maker gave a final hiss and subsiding gurgle, claiming her attention.

She put some cookies on a plate and carried them and the coffee into the sitting room. Sam came heavily down the stairs and followed her to the couch, groaning as he sat down.

"I'm going to have to do something about those attic stairs," he said. "They are just too steep." He collapsed onto the couch.

"It's not the stairs, it's . . ." Stifling the rest of her thought and the accompanying rush of dark, amorphous dread that surged around it, she asked in a too-bright voice, "Is this snow going to be serious?"

"I thought you were commenting on the attic stairs," he said, picking up a cookie.

During the night the snow turned to sleet and then to freezing rain. Sam met his classes, but Gretchen's piano students all canceled. Not wanting to go outside, she baked and iced a chocolate cake, did extra washings, sorted her linen cupboard, kept a fire going in the fireplace, and in a fit of almost terminal boredom, decided to polish the silver.

The family silver lived in an elaborate three-story box lined with blue velvet, kept at the bottom of the sideboard, another ponderous inheritance. To reach the box, Gretchen had to kneel on the floor and reach with both arms into the interior of the cabinet. While she was pulling on the box, something inside the cabinet fell with a small thud, tumbled onto the oak floor, bounced once, and rolled away.

Glad of an excuse to interrupt her struggles, Gretchen went on hands and knees in pursuit of the object. It was an empty wooden spool. She picked it up. On one end four finish nails had been driven into the wood in a rough circle around the center hole, their shanks sticking half an inch out of the wood. For a moment Gretchen had no idea of what she was looking at.

Then the picture of a little girl flashed into her mind. The child was sitting in a tiny rocker bent over the spool, twisting pieces of yarn around the nails and then pushing the braided yarn down the hole in the spool with the blunt end of one of her mother's crochet needles. Gretchen sat back on her heels and pressed the spool against her breast. She was the little girl. The child's laboring fin-

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gers and rapt attention were hers. She gripped the spool so hard the nails pressed painfully into her flesh, but the pain was nothing compared to the agony of remembrance searing her heart. Sobbing, she slowly toppled sideways and fell to the floor, still gripping the spool.

Her pain increased, and in desperation she forced herself to her feet. She drove herself to the cellar door and, half blind with tears, stumbled down the cellar stairs, past the furnace, to where the fireplace wood was piled.

Gretchen found the chopping block with Sam's axe leaning against it. She set the spool on the block, wiped away her tears, gripped the axe in both hands, and raised its heavy steel blade over her head, then brought it crashing down, shattering the spool into a dozen pieces. Hurrying now, dry-eyed and purposeful, she gathered up the largest pieces of the spool, placed them on the block, and pounded them into splinters.

Gasping from her efforts, she dropped the axe and climbed back up the stairs to the kitchen, emerging from the dark cellar as if in resurrection. The child and the awful pain were gone. In their place was a great, spreading peace. To celebrate her victory, she made herself a cup of tea and ate a piece of the cake she had baked that morning.

Gretchen said nothing to Sam about the demolition of the spool or the rush of power she had experienced at its destruction. Thinking about what she had done, she decided Sam no longer needed to be burdened by her little trouble. The thought made her smile. She had never before smiled in just that way.

"Still raining and freezing," Sam shouted when he came home that evening, clumping into the house, shaking ice crystals from his coat in a tinkling cascade, and waving a book at her as he stamped his feet on the hall runner. "A new volume in the series. Just the thing."

"Hot chocolate first," she said, taking the book from him as he went to hang up his coat. Oh dear, she thought, glancing at the book's title, *Getting to Know Your National Parks: The Grand Canyon.*

After dinner, Sam led the way into the living room, sat down on the couch, and patted the space beside him. She delayed things by adding chunks of wood to the fire. The wind had increased and frozen branches were rattling against the windows.

"It sounds so cold outside," Gretchen said, lingering at the fire, hugging herself.

"Never mind. Come and sit down. We're warm enough."

Yes, she thought gratefully and with a new sense of independence, we are. She sat beside him and glanced now and then at the pictures he turned over—South Rim, North Rim, Jackass Creek, Promontory Point—and occasionally listened to his narrative. He talked on in a relaxed and quietly informed way about what appeared to her to be various vertical arrangements of oddly colored rocks.

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The pictures made Gretchen vaguely uneasy. She dealt with her disquiet and her boredom by wondering if Sam's students sometimes felt about his lectures as she did. She looked at him speculatively, watching him turn the pages of his new book.

Then she noticed something that upset her much more than the pictures. His hands were shaking, causing the pages to tremble like poplar leaves caught in a wind.

"I'm really quite tired, Sam," she said as soon as she could speak. "Could we finish looking at the pictures tomorrow?"

"It's the weather," Sam said, snapping the book shut and smiling down on her. "It's enough to exhaust anyone."

The next morning Gretchen stayed in bed feigning sleep until Sam left for the college. With the house to herself, she sat down at her vanity table and began slowly brushing her hair. She tried to think about Sam's hands. But her mind dodged away—to her hair, to the early-morning sunlight glittering through the ice on her bedroom window, and how beautiful the day was. The trees were ablaze with crystal fire.

"He has grown old," she said aloud, reining in her galloping thoughts. Her own chestnut hair was streaked with silver, but she was comfortable with that. Her breasts, over which her hair fell in thick, soft waves, were still firm. She cupped them in her hands and was gratified by their fullness. Sam had always said she had beautiful breasts.

Sam.

She picked up her brush again. The picture of Sam's trembling hands flooded her mind, and abruptly she recalled an afternoon on their visit to Acadia National Park twelve years ago. They had been climbing down the rocks at Thunder Hole, and she had become frightened by the roar of the surf crashing against the ledges and could not go on. The sea was rough, and Sam had climbed down on the rocks much farther than she wanted to go.

She saw it so clearly. Sam had reached up with those big, capable hands and lifted her down to him. She could feel his hands close around her waist. The wind whipped her hair and the spray from the exploding waves soaked her dress. But safe in his hands, all her fear had vanished. She clung to him, laughing in the midst of the sea's foaming roar.

It was a lovely memory. Yes, she thought with a sigh, Sam is older now, but so am I. Dissatisfied and even slightly angry, she put down her brush and stood up. She would have students today.

But what was she to do about Sam? The next thought came unbidden. Take him down to the cellar. What a terrible idea! But before she could stop herself, she smiled her new smile.

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Spring arrived with a rush of gray pussy willows, yellow forsythia, and song sparrows in the alders along the brook. Sam was full of plans for the Grand Canyon. Gretchen tried very hard to think of other things. The trip meant long days in the car and nights in sometimes shabby motels. But it was something less specific that had cooled her ardor for travel.

What it was exactly, she couldn't say, but she thought it was connected to Sam's unsteady hands. Finally convinced that whatever was wrong with him was not going to go away by itself, she overcame her reluctance and said, "Sam, do you think you should see Dr. Rawlings?"

"You mean about my shakes?" he asked cheerfully. They were in the kitchen and he was trying to put peppercorns into the pepper mill. "He calls it a tremor."

"Is that what it's called?"

"Yes. Essential tremor, to be exact. He said to keep my eye on it. If it gets worse he will suggest medication. You've noticed it, then?"

"Yes," she said, sweeping up the spilled peppercorns. "Do you find it troubling?"

"Not really. It's a bit more difficult to button my shirt collar and to put a key in a lock. And my handwriting's not what it was." He smiled down at her.

"Well, if it doesn't bother you . . ." she said, quelling an inappropriate impulse to laugh.

They went on as they always went on. Sam met his classes. Gretchen gave her lessons with as much good grace as she could muster and carefully avoided the bottom of drawers and the attic.

Shortly after Sam's term ended, she suggested that they postpone the Grand Canyon trip and take a cottage for a month on Squamish Lake. There was quite a good summer theater there, and the boating, she thought, would be pleasant. The prospect of the mule ride down to the Colorado River and an overnight stay with the Havasupais had been robbing her of sleep from the moment Sam floated it as an option.

"Absolutely not," he said.

On the day they left, Gretchen cried a little as they turned out of the driveway. Sam put his hand on her knee to comfort her, but it jiggled so badly she forgot all about her tears and took the very large and lively object in both of her hands and squeezed it hard. Sam mistook the vigor with which she gripped it for excitement, but it was actually an effort on her part to keep it still.

She stared at the huge hand, and instantly the scene at Thunder Hole began shaping itself in her mind. At the same moment, she experienced a sudden and pronounced jolt of feeling that would, she knew, utterly overwhelm her if she did not instantly stop its progress. She flung his hand from her and began clapping

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her hands and shouting, "Hooray, we're on our way!"

Sam immediately echoed her, and they pulled onto the interstate singing loudly, "We're off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz. . . ." By the time they had exhausted their short list of songs celebrating journeys, Gretchen had quite subdued her demon. She sank back in her seat, too relieved to care where they were going.

The South Rim of the Grand Canyon was appallingly crowded and alarmingly expensive. But thanks to Sam's foresight, they had reservations in the South Canyon Village. They had parked their car and were going up the inn steps when a couple came out the door and greeted them so warmly that, for a moment, Gretchen thought they were people she should recognize.

"Hilda and George Grant," the man said, shaking Sam's hand vigorously. "Minneapolis. You two staying here?"

George was tall and thin. Hilda was tall and fat.

"Gretchen and Sam McBride," Sam replied. "Yes. We've come to see the Grand Canyon."

"That's it," Hilda said, giving a loud laugh. "Same as us. Good thing we weren't expecting the Mississippi."

Gretchen forced herself to laugh along with the others but began to think she might be hallucinating.

"As I understand it," Sam said, "the first European to see the canyon was—"

"Goddamned surprised," Hilda shouted, and led the laughter.

"We've got to go," George said. "Here's our card. Room Eleven. Come up before dinner for drinks."

Gretchen walked into their room and dropped onto the bed, exhausted. The drive out had been a journey through hell. The trucks had been a nightmare, but Sam was worse.

Late on their third afternoon, while driving through Arkansas, she fell asleep listening to an audiotape of *Anne of Green Gables.* When she woke, it was dark. They were on a narrow, winding road deep in the Ozarks and totally lost.

"Where are we?" she demanded.

He looked at her and laughed. "I have no idea."

"Why did you turn off the highway?"

"You know," he said good-naturedly, "I can't remember."

She saw the implications of his answer but could not think about them because at that moment, in the dull glow from the dome light, she noticed his chin had started wobbling. Thinking he was on the verge of tears, she put her hand on his arm and said, "Oh, Sam, don't cry. It's all right."

"Who's crying?" he asked cheerfully.

That was when the bad feelings began in earnest. When his hands shook, which was all the time, she remembered when they had been steady and strong. When his chin shook, she was so

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appalled her mind froze. The symptoms of his decline began giving rise to excruciating surges of feeling. By the time they reached Flagstaff, she was close to collapse.

Fortunately, Sam had not noticed anything was wrong. He was too busy talking. Gretchen toyed for a while with the possibility that his compulsion to talk was linked to whatever was wrong with him. Then she stopped thinking about it.

"Did you know," he would begin, "the Tonto Plateau has an average elevation of four thousand one hundred sixty feet. As the crow flies, it is twelve miles from it to the North Rim, but that twelve miles creates an entirely different climate. The Kaibab Limestone, forming the uppermost layer of the canyon wall, is two hundred fifty million years old. The Vishnu Schist at the bottom, two billion."

And she would drift away, recalling other times, other holidays. But there was no refuge there, because seeing him beside her intensified the memories to the point she feared her heart would shatter. And unless she pulled her feet up onto the seat and stared out her side window, which in desperation she sometimes did, she couldn't stop seeing him.

On the hotel bed she sank into a blessed sleep.

"You've slept over an hour," Sam said. "I've already had a first sighting."

He was standing beside the dresser, trying to put new film in their camera. After he had dropped the roll of film three times, she leaped off the bed and took the camera away from him.

"I don't know why I'm having so much trouble with that all of a sudden," he complained.

"Because you're shaking like a leaf, that's why." Despite her best efforts to hide her irritation, her voice was sharp.

"No more than usual," he replied. "Let's get going. We're running behind."

"Behind what?" For some reason she thought of an elephant.

"Very funny. Come on. Get ready."

She passed him the loaded camera.

They began their exploration of the canyon from the overlook nearest their lodgings and then drove to the next one. Standing behind the railings, looking down into the awesome chasm at her feet gave Gretchen vertigo. She imagined herself cartwheeling slowly and gracefully down through the crystalline air from the Kaibab Limestone, on which she was presumably standing, toward the Vishnu Schist, which she could not actually see.

"Each layer of rock represents a distinct geological period of the Earth's past," Sam told her, pointing as he spoke toward the vast emptiness before and below them.

At the next spot where Sam stopped, they were alone. Dissatis-

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fied with the view from the railed area, Sam circumvented the physical restraints and made his way to the uttermost edge of a ledge on the canyon's rim.

"Come out here," he commanded. He was pointing the camera down into the canyon.

Gretchen edged around the rails and took a tentative and uneasy step onto the gray stone. The space around her multiplied with the boom of a sail suddenly filling with wind. And she could feel that wind like a living thing rushing up the wall of the canyon and see it fluttering Sam's pants' legs. The camera shook in his hands.

"Oh my God!" Gretchen groaned as the pain seized her.

The image of Sam lifting her down from the ledge with large and steady hands burned into her mind and brought with it an unendurable sense of loss.

"It's all right," Sam said over his shoulder. "Come on. You can hold on to me."

"Sam," she cried, "I don't think I can. . . ."

"You're perfectly all right," he said. "Look. That's the Tonto Plateau." He pointed down. "We'll go there tomorrow."

He snapped a picture. Gretchen was no longer aware of where she was standing. Her fear had been vanquished by a stronger emotion. Sam leaned forward for a better look just as Gretchen reached him.

"Sam," she said, raising her voice to be heard over the wind. "I can't . . ."

She placed her hand firmly against the small of his back. He took a step forward. She took two quick steps back and then a third. Where he had been, there was only the wind and that enormous hole in the ground. Her pain began to subside.

At the inn she met Hilda and George on the front steps. George raised his camera.

"Hold it!" he said, and snapped her picture.

Gretchen noticed that his hands were steady.

"Now us," Hilda cried, and pulled the camera out of George's hands and shoved it at Gretchen.

"Where's Sam?" George asked when she had taken their picture.

Gretchen smiled. "I think he's on the Tonto Plateau."

"Don't forget the drinks," Hilda shouted as she and George hurried away.

Gretchen shivered. The air felt suddenly cold. Her heart began to race. Hilda's words echoed ominously in her mind. *"Don't forget the drinks."* Was it Hilda who had said that?

Of course not! It was Sam. It was their wedding night. They were getting out of their car in front of their motel room. Need for each other had forced them off the road. Sam was trying to unlock the door without putting down their suitcases. She was standing beside the car, laughing at his efforts, overflowing with happiness.

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"Don't forget the drinks!" he called as the door popped open.

Still laughing, she turned to lift the basket with the bottles and the food out of the backseat. She was so happy. And then she was watching herself.

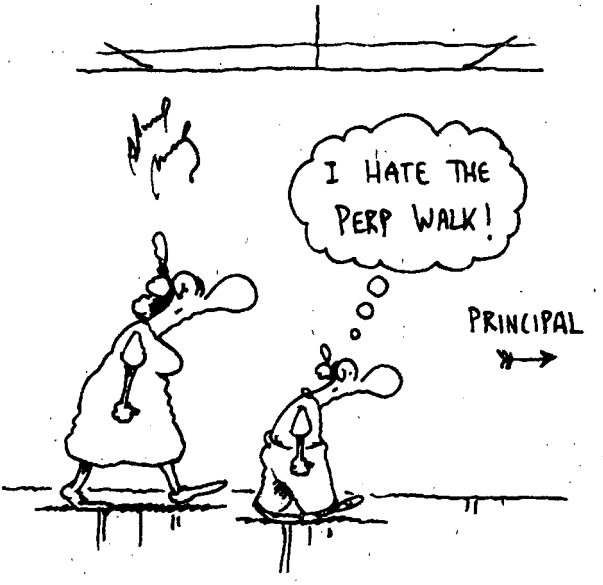
With a cry of fear, Gretchen ran down the inn steps, holding her hands over her ears so that she could no longer hear Sam calling, "Don't forget the drinks!" The motel, the basket, and the car vanished. She was on the flagstone sidewalk. Her eyes fell on a movie poster pasted on the telephone pole directly in front of her. On it, a man and woman were embracing and kissing one another passionately.

Instantly, she was beside the bed in the motel, kissing Sam and unbuttoning his shirt as fast as she could, her lips sealed to his, her breasts in his wonderful hands. She had been waiting all day for this moment. She wanted him so badly. But in the next instant, his hands on her breasts, his lips on hers, turned cold as ice. Then he faded and was gone. She was standing alone, frozen in the frame of memory.

She turned and found herself staring at the poster. With a gasp she turned away, oblivious to the people hurrying past her on the sidewalk. Instead, everywhere she looked she saw her memories advancing on her, rank on rank, file on file. Cold and gray, they marched toward her, crowding forward in an endless throng. And she knew with terrifying certainty she would never escape them.

"Sam!" she screamed. "Sam!"

He did not answer. She was alone. Weeping bitterly, she sank onto the sidewalk, her arms flung out in futile appeal, her breasts crushed painfully against the cold, indifferent stone. ●



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Adding Value

by David Williams

"George, it'll be one of the nicest birthday presents you've ever given me. I can't imagine how you and Tristan have kept the secret till now." Laura leaned over from where she was standing behind her husband's chair and kissed him lightly on the cheek, her arms draped loosely around his neck. "Thank you again, darling." She kissed him once more, this time from the other side. He had looked up on each occasion, first into her eyes, and next, more fleetingly but just as appreciatively, into the inviting cleavage exposed above the opening of her pink negligee.

In a sensual way, Laura Bodworski—maiden name Harrison—was an attractive woman, and proving to be enduringly so. Tallish, her figure, while not "catwalk" slim, was firm and statuesque, her physical appeal enhanced by long, naturally blond hair, almond-shaped brown eyes, high cheekbones, and over-generous lips. Her whole persona was made the more engaging because her facial expression commonly exuded limitless intelligence and understanding. This last was an impression only, conveniently disguising an appallingly low intellectual acuity, matched in the same degree by some highly developed unsavoury instincts. She was selfish, manipulative, and ruthless beyond belief, though, above all, she was supremely practised at disguising manifestations of these baser characteristics to her intimates.

It was April third, a Saturday, and exactly five weeks ahead of Laura's thirty-first birthday. The thought was going through her husband's mind—as it did frequently—that she was actually more

David Williams, the much-loved author of 24 novels and many short stories, died on 9/26/03. One of the things that makes his work so distinctive is the subtle thread of satirical humor that runs through most of it. As author Robert Barnard said in an obituary he wrote about David Williams, "He saw life as a comedy, and even his firmly held views about politics and religion could come under satiric scrutiny and be used for humor." We'll miss him at *EQMM*; his last story for us will appear in early 2005. ✝

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comely to look upon now than when he had married her eight years before. She had been his secretary before deciding to become his wife. That she had no intention of ever being, into the bargain, mother to his children—she hated children—was resolved by her arranging never to become pregnant, and blaming the deficit on her husband.

George Bodworski philosophically accepted the situation and counted what he took to be his blessings. "I am hoping Tristan is able to build the pool before summer, like he's promised," he said. His East European grammatical constructions were now more detectable than the accent, which he had very nearly lost. His gaze followed Laura's confident movements as she returned to her place at the table. "I trust also, my dear, that it pleases you when it's done. It won't add anything to the value of the house, of course," he completed, with a good-humoured pout and dismissive shrug.

"You've said that before, darling, which makes it even sweeter of you to have given in," she answered. "Tristan doesn't agree with you, does he?"

Tristan Gyder-Smith ran a swimming-pool business in the next village. Laura had met him at a Berkshire health club a year before this. Aged twenty-nine, he had been an only child who now lived alone in the house of his deceased parents. He had been married briefly, but after spending most of his inherited money, his wife had left him for the rich owner of a prosperous chain of seafood restaurants who had also played the accordion—not well so much as frequently. But, then, it takes all sorts.

Tristan was as ruggedly handsome as Laura was alluring, but where she was full of guile, he was a malleable innocent. After leaving his private school at eighteen, he had first failed to get into university, and then to make a career in accountancy, and also, after that, in fund management, in public relations, and, finally, in the life-insurance business. In desperation, he had invested what little was left of his family money in a swimming-pool construction and management course at a technical college, later hiring a young plumber called Ray Langford on a part-time basis, and turning the garage and toolshed of his house into a store and workshop. Since that time, he had made a just passable living. He had also recently been elected Laura Bodworski's deeply enthralled secret lover, and, by the same hand, been made a friend of the unwitting George Bodworski, because Laura liked to have her paramours conveniently on tap, as it were.

George had waved a dismissive hand at his wife's last comment. "So how should Tristan agree with me? He's in the swimming-pool business, isn't he?" He paused, coffee cup halfway to his mouth. "Not in a very big way of business, come to that. I've given him the

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contract because you said we should help him." His eyes had screwed up as if he wasn't totally sure the reason for his largesse had been a good one—except, though, the pool was to be outdoor and of only modest size.

"That was generous of you, my sweet," Laura responded. "You're always insisting this country's future lies with start-up companies like Tristan's. And I'm sure he'll do a wonderful job. The plan is gorgeous." She turned again to smooth the drawings that had been waiting beside her place, tied up with coloured ribbons, when she had come down earlier. In fact, the landscaping of her present had been based on a rough sketch she had made nearly two years before, when she had first decided it might be nice to have a pool. She hadn't pressed the whim at the time. It had been in the interim that Tristan had unexpectedly offered himself as an incentive—and latterly a double incentive.

The couple were breakfasting in the refurbished kitchen of their late-eighteenth-century, ex-vicarage home in Farringly, a pretty village a few miles west of Windsor—with views of the Royal castle. George had bought the house three years before this, its mellowed Georgian domesticity fitting harmoniously with the six-hundred-year-old, solid Gothic church set beside it in the main village street. Nowadays, the vicar of the parish lived in a small modern house a hundred yards away. Large historic vicarages were much too costly for the Church to maintain, but their sale to the London commuting gentry realised handsome contributions for central funds.

The heavily built George was bald, wore an extravagantly large moustache, and was an inch shorter than his wife. He had never been married before. His parents had been impoverished political refugees from Poland who had come to Britain in the early nineteen sixties when George had been a child. He was now a wealthy dealer in antique furniture, mostly acquired from countries in the old Eastern Communist Bloc. He owned a small retail outlet in nearby Eton, on the nearside of the ancient bridge over the Thames from Windsor. In addition to being the home of a famous English school, Eton was peppered with high-class antique emporia of which George's establishment was one of the most celebrated. He had another shop on West 54th Street in New York, and a network of well-placed suppliers in Eastern Europe whom he visited regularly.

The pickings were not as good now as they had been in the 'seventies and 'eighties, and George's buying prices had rocketed, though not nearly so much as his selling prices. Restoration work needed on pieces he bought was done in their countries of origin, to preserve authenticity as well as George's costs. One of the reasons for his visits was to watch progress on such work. In the old

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days, he had made the trips in a Ford Transit Van and brought the goods back with him. Now he flew from nearby Heathrow Airport and employed international carriers to transport the merchandise.

"If Tristan starts work on Monday, and the whole thing takes four weeks, it should be finished before you get back from your next trip," said Laura. "You're leaving two weeks today, aren't you?" she added casually.

"That's right." George gave a mischievous smile. "I planned it that way so I wouldn't be here when the garden's in a mess from the digging."

"I'm sure you did, darling. If you're away two weeks, I should be swimming by the time you get back."

"Let's hope so." He frowned. "May isn't too early for swimming outdoors?"

"Not in a heated pool, it isn't. Oh, I'm so looking forward to it."

"You are clever, Tristan. The poor dear's bought the whole deal," purred Laura. It was later that morning. She and Tristan had been making love at his house. Her compliment had been a fairly specious one. The plot they were involved in had been entirely her invention—only she praised him to bolster his courage. She wasn't entirely sure yet whether he was capable of cold-blooded murder. Otherwise, the plan was a very simple one.

Tristan took a deep breath, expanding his well-developed and, at the moment, naked bronzed and hairy chest. Like George, he was solidly built, but taller than the other man, and a good deal slimmer. Facially, though, the two were strangely alike. Even the shape of their hairless heads was similar. Because Tristan was balding prematurely, he had taken to shaving off what hair he still had. He didn't wear a moustache, but that was a deficiency easily overcome. His experiments with false moustaches had made him look uncannily like his lover's husband, or, as he and Laura had agreed, would certainly do so to a preconditioned observer. This had nearly prompted Tristan to remark that Laura kept falling for the same man—except he'd thought better of it.

"And the site'll be prepared for . . . for us a week Friday?" she asked, tracing her fingers across his stomach as they lay together on the bed.

"As far as it needs to be, yes. Three-foot-deep excavation with concrete-block side walls ready for the plastic liner to go in the following Monday. The last bit's a two-man job," he answered. "The boiler and filter will be in by then as well, but not running." There was an existing small outhouse in which both devices were to be housed. As always when he built a pool, Tristan had subcontracted the heating work to a local gas engineer.

"So your gas man won't be around at . . . at the critical time?"

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"Not again till we fill the pool the following week."

"Good." Laura nodded her approval. "What about the pool bottom?"

"I'll put in the sand and cement screed the morning after . . . after . . ."

"After you've topped George," she volunteered coolly, "and dropped him into his last resting place."

"Yes, and made it match the rest again." They had agreed he should leave spreading the last foundation layer until morning, partly to avoid his using giveaway artificial lighting late into the night, but mostly because he would need to see that George's "plot" had time to settle properly. "Well, I can't dig the hole till he's dead, can I?" he added because she looked uncertain. "I mean, what would I say if he asked what it was for? He's not stupid."

She giggled, glad to have him joke about his intended crime. It was Laura who had brought him to understand that, much as they adored each other, they had to eliminate George before they could live together in comfort on his money—and without Tristan ever having to work again. Laura had no fortune of her own, and Tristan was well aware that he couldn't expect early retirement in the business he was in. Put that way, committing a murder was the lesser of two evils for him. He hated work almost as much as he worshipped Laura, and she knew it. "No, darling, my poor old George certainly isn't stupid, but he's not nearly such a good lover as you, you gorgeous beast." She moved closer to him. "I can't wait to have you to myself forever," she whispered in his ear before biting it.

There was no doubt that flattery had helped a good deal in making a villain out of Tristan.

He sniffed. "It'll be just light enough after supper on the Friday when I take George down to look at the hole. Show him the piping for the water outlets, and how we'll fit the liner. It seems to cheer him up when I explain any technical stuff to him. Probably because he needs convincing I know what I'm doing," he completed in a self-deprecating tone, implying that George's attitude was understandable.

"And you'll dig the hole for him straight after you've croaked him?" She watched his eyes as she pointedly reiterated what he'd have done to her husband by then.

The section of the south-facing, acre-sized garden where the pool was to be sited was screened from outside view by the house to the north, by tall hedging to the south and east, and was bordered, to the west, by a centuries-old, six-foot-high red-brick wall that separated the vicarage from the church graveyard. They had considered slipping George into a substantial, flat-topped Victorian tomb on the other side of the wall on top of the couple lawfully occupying it. There was access to the graveyard through a gate in the wall, but Laura had abandoned this notion as too risky. Also,

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interring George in the same place as he would meet his end avoided the possibility of incriminating evidence surviving where it could ever be found.

"Digging his grave in the floor of the pool won't take long," Tristan replied to Laura's last question.

He and Ray Langford would have the main hole for the pool excavated in two days with the help of a hired mechanical digger, and with the spare subsoil carted off site. The concrete walling and the piping would take longer, but he was confident about the planned timing.

Tristan and George had early on agreed on a shallow pool, of the same depth all around, because it would save George money. In the ordinary way, it wouldn't save Tristan money, of course. But for him this job had long since ceased to be an end in itself. It was purely a means for providing a permanent, undetectable resting place for affluent George Bodworski.

Disposing of the body was so often the undoing of conspirators like Tristan and Laura, and she knew it. But not only had she lighted upon the perfect solution to their problem, she had also devised a credible story to account for George's disappearance—which would purportedly take place more than a thousand miles away from Farringly.

"Before I put George in . . . in his grave, I'll concrete the sides and bottom, then pack the soil around him. It'll all be dry and settled by morning," said Tristan with the merest hesitation over establishing the ownership, as it were, of the extra cavity.

"And you'll come by yourself early next day to spread the . . . what was it you said?"

"The sand and concrete screed for the pool bottom," he provided, "which is what I'd be doing next in any case."

"What about your assistant, Ray? There's no chance he'll come and join you?"

"None. He'll be too busy catching up with weekly pool maintenance work for other customers."

"And there'll be no possibility of George's bit of ground sinking later?"

"None." He was as confident as he sounded, only his knowledge of the subject was deficient. After all, he'd never buried anyone before. It still happened the two were to be fortunate that what he had figured proved right on this occasion.

"And you're up to schedule, Tristan, are you?" George enquired. It was nine o'clock on the Friday evening, the night before he was due to fly to Poland. Tristan had joined the couple for supper as Laura had arranged he should. She was busy in the kitchen. Tristan and her husband were at the far end of the thirty-foot-long,

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twelve-foot-wide excavation beyond the terrace on the southwest corner of the house, the sides sustained by close-set, parallel walls of concrete blocks. George was studying the plastic pipe work for the lower water outlet that ran out into a trench from the south and then along the west side of the pool toward the outhouse, other piping joining it on the route. Tristan was standing immediately behind the other man. Nearby there was a pile of tools next to the temporary wooden steps the two men had used to descend.

"Yes, we'll be dead on time for putting in the pool liner Monday morning," Tristan replied, too tense now to be conscious of his unfortunate phrasing. He took a step backwards. Grasping the heavy-duty hammer he had quietly lifted from the pile, with a measured, two-handed swing he brought it down with all his strength and with devastating effect onto the back of his victim's glistening head.

The rest of the plan unfolded exactly as intended as well.

Tristan had returned at eight the next morning and laid the screed, covering what little visible evidence there had been of any disturbance to the previously well-raked and levelled earth floor of the pool.

By not stopping for lunch, Tristan had completed the job just before two o'clock. He left immediately afterwards, calling a loud farewell to the Bodworskis, only one of whom was actually now alive to hear him, of course—though another widow laying flowers at a grave beyond the churchyard wall attested later that she'd heard him well enough, despite her deafness.

After returning to his own house two miles away, Tristan departed again an hour later for what he had previously told a neighbour would be an overnight bird-watching session in the New Forest, an hour and a half's journey to the southwest, close to the Hampshire coast. Ornithology was Tristan's hobby, and a night's camping in pursuit of it was a common event for him in the springtime.

In fact, Tristan altered course when clear of his own village, turning toward Heathrow. Once parked there, he had taken the courtesy bus to Terminal One, changing, in the men's room, out of a padded anorak and heavy slacks into a grey check suit and lightweight raincoat. In one significant respect he altered his facial appearance as well, in particular his upper lip, before checking in at the Club Class desk for British Airways Flight 852 to Warsaw. The plane left, on time, at 17:20, arriving at the Polish capital's Okecie Airport two hours and twenty minutes later at 20:40 local time, which was one hour ahead of London.

Laura had gone through the motions of driving her now nonexistent husband to the airport to catch the same flight. Heavy

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showers had been predicted for the afternoon and she had waited for one of these before setting out, confident that the Farringly main street would be empty of pedestrians as a consequence, with no one to notice that the passenger seat of her white, soft-topped Jaguar had been empty. She had, nevertheless, flashed her lights in greeting at the Reverend Adrian Ingran and his worthy, if lacklustre, wife, whose ancient Volvo station wagon had been drawing out of the new vicarage as she passed. The vicar recalled as much without prompting later, confirming her word that George had been with her, and volunteering that though his wife had been beside him, he thought that she had been cleaning her glasses at the time. In truth, while the cleric had recognised the car, he hadn't been able to see too clearly who had been in it. He'd only caught a side-on glimpse through its low-slung, rain-splattered windows.

A passport controller at Heathrow had happily endorsed Laura's contention that Tristan would pass for her moustached husband once he had adopted that similar distinguishing device. The corresponding check at Okecie Airport was even more casual, with the uniformed official involved not even troubling to open George's passport. From there Tristan caught a domestic flight west to Posnan at 21:10, for which George had a ticket. Tristan was delivered to Posnan forty minutes later—conveniently already halfway back to the German border, all thanks to George's original travel arrangements.

Instead of using George's guaranteed reservation at the airport's National Hotel, Tristan took the bus to the newly refurbished railway station in the centre of the city. While changing back into his bird-watching gear in the gleaming new men's room there, he peeled off and flushed away the false moustache before packing his other clothes into the nylon backpack he had been carrying inside George's sole piece of luggage, a cabin bag which he later left hanging on the back of a cubicle door. It carried no owner's or manufacturer's identification. He then bought a ticket for the 23:15 express train to Frankfurt, arriving there at 00:45. He had presented his own passport for checking when he boarded the train in Poland and when he left it again in Germany. Both examinations had been cursory, with no written notations involved.

The buses for Frankfurt airport had stopped for the night, and since he didn't want to take a taxi in his new guise as an unremarked budget-orientated tourist, he slept for several hours undisturbed in a corner of the railway station's warm booking hall. He shaved and showered in the men's room there at six, catching an early bus out to the airport. As he was well aware, there were any number of Sunday flights to London, all of them, as it proved, half empty. In the belief that a foreign airline would be

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even less interested in his existence than a British one, either now or in the unlikely event of any future enquiries being made, he bought a standby ticket on the 09:20 Lufthansa flight to Heathrow. He collected his car on arrival and was back at his home by mid-morning, his ornithological trip abandoned early, he later explained to his neighbour, because of the now persistent rain.

The memorial service to George Bodworski was held in St. Mary's church, next to his house, two years after it was accepted he left for the journey from which he was never to return. Most of the villagers attended. He had been well liked locally and people were deeply sympathetic toward his wife, who had borne her loss with great fortitude.

"Of course we must go on hoping, Adrian," she had sighed, wide-eyed, as she and the vicar, seated together on her drawing-room sofa, had been preparing the contents of the service sheet the week before. "But in my heart I know he's . . . he's gone. If he was alive, he'd have been in touch with me somehow, no matter how difficult it was, I know he would." She paused, eyes now glistening as they lifted to gaze through the open window toward the placid surface of the swimming pool. It consoled her to think that being buried in a vicarage garden was nearly as good as being in consecrated ground. Not that she was in any sense an inward true believer, only superstitious. Even so, she had never really cared to swim in that pool.

"I'm certain he was killed by thieves," she went on—as it happened, quite accurately. "He carried so much cash with him on those trips. That's the way of the antiques business, of course. A seller expects his money on the spot."

"And you feel that someone saw how much—" The middle-aged cleric had been supportive from the beginning toward his wealthiest and most glamorous parishioner. She had been a regular member of the congregation since what nearly everyone now referred to as her bereavement.

"What else, Adrian?" she had broken in. "I told you, he drew twenty-five thousand pounds from the bank to take with him the day before he left. It was half in sterling, half in euros. I used to plead with him at least to take traveller's cheques instead, but he wouldn't listen. So somewhere between leaving the arrival building in . . . in Posnan Airport, and before he could reach his hotel there, someone attacked him, or possibly abducted him. I'm sure of it."

"But when you went to Posnan yourself, last year, you learned nothing?"

"Nothing. The police did their best. Their theory is, he decided to walk to the hotel and was set upon before he got there. He only had a light bag, and he liked to get exercise after a flight. It was

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dark, of course." She paused. "Twenty-five thousand is a lot of money to most Poles, especially crooked ones. If it was someone, or a gang of people, who started out meaning to hold him for ransom, the money he had on him might have been enough. I mean, to satisfy them without needing to take further risks."

"Indeed," replied the clergyman. "And, of course, he'd have put up a fight."

"Oh, no doubt at all. I only wish I knew what they did with his body." Slowly she turned her gaze from the pool, as a single tear ran down her cheek. "I just hope it wasn't a painful death."

"I've prayed for that often, my dear," the vicar consoled her, stretching out a hand to squeeze one of hers. "And you know you can count on me for anything I can do to help in the future?" Because of her warm response he kept the hand where it was for longer than he'd intended before adding with a guilty primness: "That applies to Charlotte and the children as well as me, of course."

"This is the life," exclaimed Tristan Gyder-Smith, his feet dangling in the pool—but not the pool he had built for the Bodworskis in Farringly. It was the pool that had come with the pretty, bougainvillea-draped villa Laura had bought in the hills behind Cannes on the French Riviera.

The South of France had suited them both—she because it was more *chic* than Spain, and he because wherever Laura wanted to live was fine with Tristan.

It hadn't all been plain sailing for the two of them since they had disposed of George. Although, for a pair without much inventive brain power between them, they had managed to bring off the perfect crime, there had been irritating surprises in the follow-up—the absence of a body being one. This major deficiency had severely curtailed their freedom of action.

Fortunately George's business had been registered, for tax purposes, as a joint undertaking with his wife, with only one of their signatures required on cheques or contracts. This meant that while she had been free to dispose of the whole concern, the law demanded that half the proceeds of the sale had to be frozen for seven years against the possibility of George reappearing. Only after the statutory period was up would Laura be able to start proceedings to declare her husband legally dead, allowing her to claim all his assets, as specified in his will. Since the total valuation of their joint estate, including the Farringly house, was over ten million pounds (George had been a shrewd investor), Laura had accepted that she could rub along on half that until she became entitled to the lot. In addition, there was an insurance policy on George's life for two million pounds. This too would not be

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paid out until he was legally dead, so that Laura reluctantly came to regard it as the delayed icing on the cake. It had been taken out by George at the time of their marriage—far too long before his disappearance to suggest to charitable folk that it might have offered a reason for his wife to have murdered him. Notwithstanding, since the insurance company was not a charitable institution, its managers had, as a matter of routine, made discreet enquiries into the possibility of foul play before dismissing the notion—with a certain amount of entirely professional regret.

Laura had also been making discreet enquiries, but on her own behalf, about divorcing George for desertion, only to discover that such proceedings could not begin until five years had elapsed since the event. Her adviser had also warned that her ceasing to be George's wife might further delay her eventual outright entitlement to all his worldy wealth—including the life-insurance money. She had thus decided not to pursue the course any further, on balance figuring that divorce might tarnish her nicely developing image as a chaste and grieving widow, while doing little or nothing to improve her existing material situation.

For Laura to continue as George's wife did, of course, elongate the conventionally "decent interval" after which, and in the ordinary way, it would be socially acceptable for her to marry Tristan. But Tristan himself had been strongly against a divorce, fearing it might still suggest a motive for Laura having been somehow involved in her husband's death—which was only a step away from the possibility of Tristan being involved in it with her. Altogether, while he was anxious to marry Laura for mercenary as well as passionate reasons, he rated their continuing status as innocents to be more important for the time being.

Over more than two years the two had publicly acted out a friendly relationship that slowly and beguilingly developed into something much more intimate. It was the vicar of Farringly who, by openly (and somewhat vicariously) encouraging the liaison, gave this mutual blossoming of affection the blessing, as it were, of the church, and with it a moral status beyond challenge within the community. So it had not been for nothing that Laura had nurtured her association with the cleric whom she knew quietly idolised her. Certainly at the end of the second year, the holy imprimatur on the budding romance would have underwritten general approval of Tristan and Laura cohabiting if they had so chosen—except while they had both worked for this, it had never been their intention to activate it in the Farringly environment.

This was why Laura sold the house and moved to France.

Shortly afterwards, Tristan sold his business and his house, both quite cheaply, to Ray Langford, the industrious and ambitious plumber, who had easily raised a mortgage to meet the mod-

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est cost. It was clear to everyone that Tristan was quitting the area to join Laura, but the matter was never the subject of malicious gossip. They both left the community with unblemished characters, exactly as they had planned.

Laura, too, had been fortunate in finding an instant taker for her impressive home. The buyer, Charles Pearce, was a high-flying partner in an international investment bank. He and his wife Janet, with their three boys, had been searching for just such a house for over a year. "These days, you know," Charles had remarked to Laura after agreeing to pay her full and substantial asking price, "a heated pool really does add value to a property."

"My late husband never believed that," she answered with a moving sadness, then added, "but he still built this one for my pleasure. It . . . it was his last birthday present to me." She now invariably referred to George as her late husband, and very nearly all the village people did the same.

"I'm so very sorry," the young banker's pretty wife had offered at the time in a bonding, deeply sympathetic tone.

Now, at the sound of a car engine, Tristan pulled his feet from the pool. "I think that was the postman," he said, striding into the house. He reappeared a moment later with a small clutch of envelopes. "One handwritten letter for you with an English stamp. Can't read the postmark," he offered, passing the envelope to Laura, who was sunning herself on a yellow cushioned lounge chair at the pool's edge.

"Oh, it's from Janet Pearce," she remarked with surprise. "Funny, she's never written before. Always telephones."

Janet, the new chatelaine of Farringly's Old Vicarage, had further warmed toward her predecessor when she had been making frequent visits to the house, deciding on new fabrics and furniture, before Laura had moved out.

"You should tell her e-mail's cheaper than steam mail. Quicker, too," said Tristan, settling beside her on a matching chair.

"She's not computer literate," Laura went on, scanning the letter. "Oh, and the poor thing's got laryngitis, says she has no voice at all and . . ." She stopped suddenly with a gasp, one hand leaping to her mouth. A moment later she uttered: "Oh my God, Tristan, listen to this." She began reading aloud. " 'You know how crazy our three boys were about the pool from the first time they saw it? Well, all through the Easter holidays they've practically lived for their swimming, Andrew, our oldest, in particular. Now they're all back at boarding school and he's been put in as a reserve member of the senior swimming team. He's the youngest member but will very likely be captain next year, only the master who runs the swimming wants him to concentrate on his diving, says he's a natural. Andrew is over the moon but, yes, you've

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guessed it, he wants to know if we can have our pool deepened to eight feet at the far end, with a diving board, of course, so he can practice when he's at home. As you'd expect, our other two are just as keen on the idea. We've told them it would all be too expensive to do, but Charles is so chuffed for Andrew he got your nice Ray Langford onto the job straightaway. Ray's promised to have the whole thing ready by half-term, which is only five weeks away, so it's all hands on deck. Really it means starting again with virtually a new pool with a sloping bottom. Ray's suggested we have what's called a Gunite base this time, with a blue ceramic finish. It should last forever. Charles agreed, and work starts tomorrow—' "

"What's the date on the letter?" Tristan put in tensely.

"April tenth," she answered, looking up, her face drained of colour.

"That's eight days ago." He let out a deep breath. "On the first day Ray will have torn out the old pool liner. He'd put the excavator in on the second, which is when he'll have struck—"

"Tristan, we'll have to—" she began.

"It's probably too late for us to do anything," he interrupted despondently. "Even for me to disappear."

"No, it isn't, and there's plenty of money upstairs." Laura looked at the time before continuing rapidly. "If the police come, I'll swear forever I know nothing about what happened to George. Remember that's what we've always said . . . if the worst happened?"

"That I'd take all the blame? Of course," Tristan completed for her, with total resignation. "Stick to that and—" But he had been interrupted by a long, insistent ringing on the doorbell.

A black Citroen saloon was drawn up in the villa's short driveway. Three men had alighted. One was a uniformed French policeman, the others were detectives from the Thames Valley Police in England. There were a dozen more French officers, flak-jacketed and heavily armed, deployed around the building and its fenced perimeter—in the street on the sloping garden boundary to the south, and in the grounds of the two adjacent villas. It was the fence onto the lower road that Tristan had been scaling when he was overpowered, though he subsequently put up no resistance.

The English detectives were carrying something metaphorically quite as explosive as guns, in the warrants for the arrest of both Tristan Peregrine Gyder-Smith and Laura Emily Bodworski on charges of murder and conspiracy to murder George Stanislaw Bodworski, plus authority for their immediate extradition to Britain.

At the subsequent trial, Tristan pleaded guilty, partly because the evidence against him had been overwhelming once the body was unearthed. After admitting his impersonation of George, Tristan's further story, invented for him by Laura, had been just about credible. He confessed to murdering George for his money in a

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deserted part of a Heathrow car park, tricking him into going there after check-in. That he had left the body in the trunk of his car, and buried it in the pool after returning next day, all without Laura's knowledge, had been very nearly swallowed by the court. He had hoped his plea might shorten the length of his sentence—but he was still jailed for life.

So was Laura.

Her insistence that she'd later become Tristan's innocent dupe and lover might just have held up, except for the evidence of the one witness she had expected would clear her. The Reverend Ingran had, under cross-examination, admitted he could not swear on oath that he had seen George being driven that Saturday afternoon to Heathrow. Nor was it so much the cleric's religious honesty that had made him confess the truth. It had been the pressure exerted on him to do so by his boring but faithful and devoted wife.

That lady had endured enough of her husband's incessant counselling of the Widow Bodworski when she had lived in the village and, more dangerously, during her months in jail before the trial. Charlotte Ingran had no intention of allowing the rich, unattached, and guilty harlot to be freed, ready to seduce her besotted Adrian away from his sacred vocation, as well as his deserving family.

And she might have been right as well. ☺

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

M	E	T	E	■	■	C	L	A	R	A	■	G	A	B
A	C	E	R	B	■	H	Y	S	O	N	■	I	L	L
C	H	A	R	L	I	E	C	H	A	N	■	D	O	E
S	O	L	■	O	N	C	E	■	R	U	B	E	N	S
■	■	■	B	U	C	K	E	T	■	A	L	O	E	S
A	M	B	U	S	H	■	■	O	R	L	O	N	■	■
G	E	E	S	E	■	S	O	F	A	■	O	F	F	S
H	A	R	T	■	W	O	L	F	E	■	D	E	L	I
A	N	T	I	■	H	U	E	Y	■	T	I	L	E	R
■	■	H	E	L	O	T	■	■	C	H	E	L	A	S
A	B	A	S	E	■	H	A	N	A	U	D	■	■	■
N	E	C	T	A	R	■	C	O	R	M	■	R	O	E
I	T	O	■	F	A	T	H	E	R	B	R	O	W	N
L	E	O	■	E	T	H	E	L	■	S	O	U	N	D
E	L	L	■	D	E	E	D	S	■	■	B	E	S	S

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Cirque du Bohemia

by Cathryn Grant

Alexandra never wanted to go to the party to begin with. She hated parties. All those people making demands on her, wanting clever conversation and lighthearted laughs, swarming around each other like animals. She especially despised big, uncontrolled gatherings like this one promised to be.

There didn't seem to be any way out of it. It was a company thing. It was expected. She hadn't even really wanted to make the short trip to Southern California for the trade show. It was hard to leave her daughter with a friend. She worried constantly—would Ellie do her homework? Would she remember to wait to be picked up after school? Would she have bad dreams, wake up crying?

"It's part of your job," her manager said. "You don't have a choice."

Alexandra resented that. They couldn't force her to go on a trip for the company. How dare he tell her she had no choice. There was always a choice, wasn't there? There was a choice between going along with what was expected or swimming against the tide. Alexandra had swum lazily with the tide all her life. Hearing it put like that—"You don't have a choice"—was like flame in her ears. But she had Ellie to consider. No choice.

The second day of the trade show was followed by the company-sponsored party—themed Cirque du Bohemia. AcuSAN was throwing the party for important customers, not-so-important customers, and would-be customers who had heard about the party and come to the trade-show booth to plead for tickets.

Alexandra and the AcuSAN employees had drinks and dinner, waiting for eight o'clock, when the party was set to start. A sharp, frightened voice inside Alexandra told her to skip the party. She was drifting too far away from solid ground. Her rental car was still parked at the convention center. The other three women were

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staying at a different hotel, just a cab ride away, but it had been overbooked. Alexandra got stuck at a suburban hotel, twenty miles outside of downtown. Jared Philips, who was staying with a college buddy, was the only other person with a rental car. He offered the women a ride, while the other men took cabs. Jared popped open the trunk, Alexandra dropped her heavy bag inside, and they scrambled into the car. She should have begged off. She should have insisted on taking her car, telling them later that she'd gotten lost. Instead, the activity swept her along in its wake, first to dinner, while her car stayed behind in the parking garage.

When they pulled up to the Palace Hotel, fifty or sixty people were lined up on the sidewalk, waiting to get inside. Jared stopped the car in the middle of the street, directly across from the front entrance to the Palace—touted as a refurbished nineteen-twenties hotel, featuring a "grand staircase." A man dressed like a mime was wildly waving his arms, trying to get cars to move forward to a parking lot on the next block. His face perspired under the thick white paint, making him look crazed.

"I don't see anything right here," said Jared. "Go on inside and I'll find a place to park."

They climbed out. The other three women started toward the end of the line. Alexandra leaned into the passenger-side window. "I need my bag out of your trunk."

The mime was suddenly standing behind her, his damp breath on her neck. He shouted right in her ear, "Move out of the street. We have to keep traffic moving."

Alexandra ignored him. "Please pop open the trunk so I can get my bag."

The mime began gently tugging at her arm. "Ma'am. You have to move out of the street."

"I need my bag!"

The mime increased his pressure on her arm. She tried to pull free. He hung on tight. If he was supposed to be adding a festive air to the party, more playful than a regular traffic cop, he wasn't succeeding. The harder she pulled, the tighter his fingers gripped her upper arm. How dare he grab on to her like that? He wasn't a police officer, and she wasn't doing anything wrong.

"Come on," called Chloe. "What are you doing?"

"My bag. I need my bag."

Chloe stepped to the edge of the curb, waving her arm for Alexandra to join them. "You don't want that big heavy thing at the party! You won't have any fun."

"I need it." With the mime's hard grip still around her arm like a handcuff, she strained toward the car door.

Jared put the car in gear and started to roll forward. "I'll bring it when I come inside." With that he put his foot on the gas, and moved off down the street.

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Alexandra trembled, trying to hold back tears while the mime tugged her out of the path of backed-up traffic creeping toward them. Then he lost interest in her. Once he'd separated her from everything she needed, he released his grasp on her arm. She walked slowly toward the curb.

"What am I going to do?" she whispered.

Chloe grabbed her lower arm. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worrying," snapped Alexandra. "I need it. You don't understand. My car keys, my cell phone, my hotel key, my wallet . . ."

"You don't need all that stuff now. Let's go have fun. Free drinks. Why do you need your wallet?"

"What if I can't find Jared?"

"He'll be here in a few minutes. Stop worrying about it."

Resentment scratched at Alexandra's stomach. She wasn't worrying. Everywhere she looked were strange buildings, strange people. Her car was parked miles away, and she was standing on a street she didn't even know the name of. Her whole life had just rolled out of sight, leaving her alone, with a woman she hardly knew urging her to have fun. Just like Brian had rolled slowly out of her life, limply assuring her she'd be fine without him. Leaving her disoriented, desperately hunting for a job, after years at home raising her daughter. Throwing her into a world as incomprehensible as Cirque du Bohemia. After he left, the ground under her feet felt as if it was constantly shuddering, undulating in the throes of an earthquake. The only place she felt safe was at home, in her tiny apartment, with Ellie sitting right where Alexandra could see her.

She followed Chloe to the line. They squeezed in next to Pam and Elizabeth. The others twitched with excitement, anxious for the line to move forward so they could get into the elaborate hotel, munch the snacks, and collect as many free drinks as they could before eleven o'clock, when the bar would become "no host." Alexandra stood quietly, trembling slightly. There was a hollow feeling at the bottom of her stomach. The others twittered like birds, living in the moment, unencumbered by children, distant hotel rooms, and missing bags that contained their entire lives. Worry-free. They had tiny purses, empty but for lipstick tubes and mini hairbrushes. *They* had their hotel keys. Alexandra had nothing. She shivered in spite of the balmy Los Angeles air, clutching her arms and rubbing the spot where the mime had gripped her. They reached the tall double doors, handed over their rose-and-cream-colored tickets stamped prominently with cursive script reading "*Cirque du Bohemia*" and the words of the Bohemian motto: Life, Truth, Beauty, Love. Stamped even more prominently was the AcuSAN logo.

Inside the double doors was a cavernous lobby filled with people. On each side of the lobby were doors leading to dance halls. On the far side was a sweeping staircase that rose thirty-five feet to

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the second floor. A few feet from each wall was a railing, creating a section on each side of the staircase for those going down, the wide center left for people climbing to the second floor. Halfway up was a narrow landing. The stairway was a fluttering ribbon of people moving in a wide swath up the center and back down the side sections. The constant stream of bodies looked like a waterfall; the roar of voices added to the effect. Alexandra stood just inside the door, her lips parted, shocked at the surging mass of human beings. They were everywhere: filling the lobby, packed shoulder-to-shoulder, washing up and down the stairs and in and out of the dance halls on either side. Only twenty employees from AcuSAN were here. Who were all these people? They couldn't possibly all be customers and business partners.

Chloe grabbed her arm. "Come on. Let's go upstairs. I hear they have a swing band." She began to weave her way through the crowd, dragging Alexandra behind her. The air was hot with the press of people, stinking with cloying perfume. Alexandra could hardly breathe. She wasn't sure she could make it up all those stairs without pausing. She wasn't as nimble and full of energy as her coworkers. Standing and handing out brochures and party tickets all day had drained whatever energy she'd woken up with that morning.

They started up the stairs. Each step was only a few inches high, forcing them to take many small steps, making the climb more relentless. The rough soles of Alexandra's shoes caught at the carpet, forcing her to concentrate on lifting her feet carefully. They climbed, unable to pause because of the people following behind, pulled forward by the mass ahead of them. She couldn't even see the top of the stairs, just the lower backs and hips of the people climbing in front of her. Her thighs burned. She could feel her forehead getting warm and damp. Even without the weight of her bag on her shoulder, the tight muscles between her shoulder blades clenched into a solid knot. Her bag. She'd forgotten about it while her lungs were consumed with maintaining steady breathing and her eyes stared down at the dark red and gold carpet, watching the movement of her feet. She turned around nervously, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jared, looking at the door where a line still seethed into the lobby. She'd never find him in this crowd. Surely he had parked the car by now. Looking down made her sway slightly. She turned back quickly.

"Hey," said a male voice behind her. "You can't just stop and stand in the middle of the stairs. Get moving." She felt pressure on her back. The man who had spoken was leaning against her, urging her upward.

Alexandra didn't turn to look. She didn't want to see the owner of the harsh, pushy voice. She would take her own sweet time. He couldn't make her go faster. The people ahead of her were only a step or two above.

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"C'mon, lady. We're goin' to a party, don't stand there all night." He laughed loudly. "Whoo-hooo," he cried, making a noise that sounded like a train.

She started climbing again, slowly lifting one foot after the other, feeling as if the stairs would never end. There should have been a handrail down the center. It was dangerous, all these people crowding up and no bar to help them keep their balance. If one started to tumble, the whole crowd might go cascading down to the bottom, a gushing flood of people. Music and drinks were available on the ground floor. Why was everyone compelled to climb up? They pushed forward like salmon driven to swim upstream.

Imagine, thought Alexandra, being so young that all you thought about was dancing and drinking. Even when she had been Chloe's age, she never looked like Chloe. Confident and sophisticated. Long waves of red hair that Chloe knew well enough to leave alone rather than try to cut and style. Alexandra couldn't ever remember being carefree. Life had been one worry after another. She resented Chloe's eager press forward into whatever she would find at the top of the stairs. She hated Chloe for her lack of sympathy. Alexandra had been separated from the bag that tethered her to the rest of her life, while the other women acted like children, not a concern in the world.

At the top of the stairs, Chloe didn't stop to suck in air. She pushed forward, unafraid to weave her lithe body through the crowds of young people. The scent of perfume was thicker. Every odor from the first floor had crept up the staircase and hung listless in the air with nowhere to go. The crush of people was just as thick, people standing in clusters holding pale icy green drinks in clear plastic cups, others clutching the necks of beer bottles. Chloe led them around a corner and down a short hallway that quickly turned another sharp corner and led into a long hall with a ceiling that reached up another full story. The swing band was still fiddling around with microphones on the stage. A woman with platinum-blond hair, wearing a red satin dress, was humming into the microphone, oblivious to the crowd at the side of the hall. At last, some breathing room. Alexandra took large gulps of air; it was cold, as if the room had been closed off for a long time. Most of the people stood pressed against the bar that ran the length of one wall. A few groups stood in the center of the dance floor or sat on wooden folding chairs at tiny round tables on the opposite side of the hall.

"Drinks, everyone!" squealed Chloe. They obediently followed her to the bar. "What do you want?" She peered at her friends, her eyes sparkling, anxious only to start having fun. "Well?" she said after the briefest pause. "Don't take all night. We only have a few hours before we have to start paying." She giggled.

"Margaritas," chirped Pam and Elizabeth.

"Don't be a party pooper, Alex. What do you want?"

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Alexandra hated her. "Beer," she mumbled.

None of them really needed more to drink. They'd had drinks in the hotel bar before dinner, and sake and Japanese beer with dinner. But free alcohol. No one could resist. They waited patiently for their drinks, and when they all had one in hand, drifted away from the bar, one fluid movement, less urgent now that they had something to hold. The four women moved down the length of the room toward a group of familiar faces. The others chatted with the marketing director, sipping their drinks too frequently. The band continued to fiddle with their sound equipment. Voices rose up to the vaulted ceiling and slammed back down on their heads. Nearly every comment was punctuated with a "What?" followed by, "What did you say?"

Talking was painful, listening was too much work, and Alexandra couldn't ease the tight feeling in her chest. She'd never see Jared, her bag, or the rest of her life again. To make the feeling go away, she took tiny, quick sips of beer. The beer cooled her throat, but did nothing to alleviate the lump in her chest, which was swelling like rising dough. Someone brushed against her side. George Mayhill, an older man with a neatly trimmed beard, was standing next to her, moving his hips slightly to some unheard rhythm. He threw back the last of his Margarita and set the cup on a nearby table. Alexandra moved slightly so his arm would stop bumping against her shoulder. He moved closer.

"Let's dance," he said, loud enough for her to flinch, and perfectly loud enough for her to make out his words.

Alexandra took two more little sips of beer and said nothing.

"There's a disco band downstairs. Come on, let's go."

Did he assume that because she worked for the same company she was available as a dance partner? He hadn't even asked if she wanted to dance, he just assumed. She turned slightly, looking at the animated faces of the others in the group, their eyes bright with some need she couldn't define.

George nudged her slightly in the back. "Let's go."

Alexandra took a final swallow of her beer, put it on the table near his empty cup, and walked away. She could picture him staring after her open-mouthed. She had to find Jared. Chloe couldn't be counted on to help. Coming upstairs had been a terrible mistake. Jared could slip into the building and disappear in the crowd. She needed to get downstairs immediately. Longing for something to stop the trembling of her hands, she moved back to the bar and asked for another beer. The cold, hard neck of the bottle gave her something to grip while she wound her way back through the narrow hall to the top of the grand staircase. She looked down from the top of the stairs. The faces below swam in front of her, laughing, mouths open, talking. Constant movement. She couldn't possibly descend all those stairs without a rail to hold, but the sides of the staircase were so thick with people she didn't see how she'd

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make her way to the safety of a handrail. People bumped her, pushing past, jostling her arm so that a bit of foam developed in the neck of her beer bottle. It rose, threatening to spill over like bile forcing its way out of her stomach and into her esophagus. She lifted the bottle to her lips and sucked foam into her mouth. Tipping her head back, she took a longer swallow. It made her feel calmer, but it was also making her anxious to find a restroom.

People were still streaming through the entrance. None of them Jared. Tears pricked at her eyes. She had no idea how long she'd been inside the hotel, how long she'd stood in the upper hall, or even how long she'd been standing here, swaying, trying to scrape up the courage required to descend to the first floor. Had Jared parked the car, or was he still driving around the streets of L.A.? Was he already in the building? Did he even remember her bag was in his trunk? She took another swallow of beer and pushed her way to the side of the staircase. She deserved a space on that handrail as much as any other person here. More so. She shoved past a cluster of women, ignoring their heavy-lidded eyes as she pushed them out of her way and reached for the railing with her left hand. The moment her fingers closed around it, she felt steadier. Slowly she began the long trip down, counting the steps, then losing track as she shifted her focus to keeping the bottle of beer close to her side. She looked down at the red and gold pattern of the carpet, watching her feet, terrified of tripping and pitching forward. Going down was much worse than climbing up. When she reached the bottom, she gasped with pleasure, feeling the solid floor under her feet. Jared could be anywhere. He could have passed her on the stairs and she would never have known. The first thing to do was find the restroom.

It was easy to find. It was stationary. Why hadn't she thought to arrange a meeting place with Jared? She pressed her hand against the side of her head, trying to silence the accusing voices telling her what she should have done. It wasn't like her to get sucked into a strange place with even stranger people. Every time she thought about the futility of trying to find Jared and her bag, tears rushed to her eyes. She pushed her way through the white swinging door that led to the women's restroom. Miraculously, there was an empty stall. The first good thing that had happened all night. She would give anything to exchange this bit of good luck for the impossible luck of finding Jared. She shut the white wood door behind her and slipped the bar into the socket of the lock. Finally some privacy. No more leering faces, drunken smiles, pressing bodies. Just pure white walls, and white tile floors broken sporadically by tiny black tiles. She leaned against the door and let the tears come. They poured down her face. Chloe didn't care what happened to her, didn't even notice she was gone. No one cared. Alexandra shook with fear. She didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay here alone, forever.

After a while, she ran out of tears. She relieved her bladder,

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holding her half-full bottle of beer the whole time. Then she leaned against the door, waiting until she could feel the swelling around her eyes start to subside. Just as her fingers touched the lock, and she felt she'd swallowed enough courage to emerge into the circus atmosphere again, she heard Chloe's shrill voice.

"Where did she go? Are we supposed to look after her just because she can't find her damn bag?"

Pamela's laugh danced across the top of Chloe's voice. "Why is she even here? She's not having any fun. I, for one, am not going to feel responsible for her problems."

"But where did she go? Do you think she left to look for Jared? I turned around and she just disappeared," said Chloe.

"What are you, her mother?"

All three women laughed. Then they were silent. Alexandra guessed they were covering their mouths with fresh coats of lipstick. She took a swallow of beer. Hatred foamed in her mouth. She wanted to charge out through the door and slam them into the wall. At the same time, she felt immobilized with shame. It was as if she were a child again, huddled in the girls' bathroom, hearing the other girls chattering, having fun. Never worried about anything, not anxious about all the other children rushing around the playground. Always too many people. The world was filled with far too many people and she wanted to cling to the safe white walls around her. She wanted to be home in her quiet apartment. Just her and Ellie. Venturing out only when it was safe, early in the morning when there weren't so very many people.

"She's such a loser. But I do feel sort of nervous about what happened to her. What should we do?" Chloe's voice rose sharply at the end.

"We shouldn't do anything. She's probably running around obsessed with finding Jared. She's a big girl. We don't have to look out for her. Let's go party."

Without any more discussion, they tramped to the door and pushed their way out of the restroom. Alexandra leaned her head against the side of the stall, aching from the mixture of shame and hatred. All she needed was her bag and she could escape from these horrid people. Afraid that more tears would come, she stayed motionless for a few minutes. Nothing happened except the increasing pressure in her chest. She opened the door, ignoring a sharp look from one of the women waiting for a stall. She made her way to the sink and balanced her bottle on the tiny shelf under the mirror while she washed her hands.

The crowd was slightly thinner outside the door. She was no closer to finding Jared and reclaiming her bag than she'd been when she saw him disappear down the street. It seemed that hours must have passed. A man with slicked-back hair, dressed all in black, jostled her arm and she felt the beer bottle slip out of her

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grip. It fell on the floor and a bit spilled out onto the carpet. Alexandra bent to pick it up, feeling a perverse sense of pleasure at the sight of the small puddle of beer on the well-preserved carpet. She stood up. Her eyes automatically focused on the grand staircase. Chloe and the others were climbing back up, having almost reached the midpoint. Alexandra moved toward the stairs. She didn't know what she would say to them, but she couldn't think what else to do but follow them upstairs again. The only hope of locating Jared was to clump together with the rest of her coworkers. Surely he would look for one of them. She threaded her way through the crowd, sick of their loud laughter, their reeking perfume and cologne, their trendy clothes shouting, "Look at me!" She hated them all. She was tired of the silly grins and unrestrained pushing brought on by alcohol. Every single person in the building had had too much to drink. Including herself. She could feel it in the pressure behind her eyes, and the slightly blurred quality of her thoughts. She didn't need anything more to drink. She tipped her beer bottle and let some of it run out on the carpet. It felt good. Better than it had felt watching it spill when that man jostled her arm. Too many people. No one was in control. It served them right if their carpet was spoiled. She tipped the bottle again, feeling a calmness run through her while the warm liquid poured out on the carpet.

As she neared the foot of the stairs, she let the entire bottle slide out of her grasp. It fell to the floor and was lost behind her. She moved steadily forward. She would follow the other women up the stairs. A sense of peace fluttered inside her. Spoiling the carpet had eased her anxiety. Climbing the stairs increased her feeling of elation. Climbing to safety. There was something about moving up that made her feel she had a destination. No longer wandering helplessly trying to find someone who refused to be found. At the top of the stairs, Jared would be more likely to see her. Or maybe he had already joined the others. Climbing up was the answer. She moved methodically. This time, her legs didn't burn as much. In a moment she was near the top, just a few steps behind the other women.

"Chloe!" Her voice sounded hoarse in her own ears, dry from lack of use. It was drowned by the roar of voices around her.

"Chloe!" she screamed.

Chloe jumped and turned around, looking guilty, grasping at Pam's arm to keep her balance. They moved off the staircase into the upper lobby. All three stared down at her with narrow eyes and grim lips. The initial look of guilt had slid off Chloe's face. Alexandra reached the top step and stood next to them. "Have you been able to find Jared?" she gasped.

Pam and Elizabeth moved away, rolling their eyes. She could hear their snickering as they turned their backs to her. Alexandra moved to the other side of Chloe, blocking her from following the other two. Chloe looked at her blankly. She acted as if she hadn't

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heard. Alexandra leaned closer. "Have you? I have to get my bag."

"What is your *problem?*" shouted Chloe.

Her voice roared above the shrinking crowd. It must be nearing eleven. The free drinks were drying up and the mass of people withered right along with the evaporating flood of alcohol. Alexandra looked down the grand staircase. A narrow stream of people still flowed up, but the rush going down the two sides was much thicker. The sea of people on the first floor was thinner, and there, standing at the foot of the stairs, was Jared. He had her bag slung over his shoulder.

Alexandra felt tears rush to her eyes. She gasped, "My bag," her words bursting out in a sob.

Disgust spread across Chloe's glossy burgundy lips. Her eyes were empty of pity. She was nothing but a drunken floozy, swaying on her feet, not a care in the world, unsympathetic. Downright cruel. Alexandra raised her hands and placed them firmly on Chloe's shoulders, feeling nothing but bone, warm skin, and the thin silky straps of her top. She pushed with all her strength. Chloe staggered backwards, nearly losing her balance. Alexandra felt free. Her bag was at the foot of the stairs. Finally she could escape. Chloe was still teetering, her eyes wild, looking for something to grab. She reached out, her fingers clawing at Alexandra's jacket. Taking a step forward, Alexandra shoved her harder. Chloe toppled over, pitching down the stairs like a bowling pin, head over base, falling so fast her head seemed to bounce off the red and gold carpet.

Instead of trying to break her fall, the people who were still climbing up gasped with one voice and surged to the sides, afraid of getting caught in the downward momentum. Chloe's arms waved frantically as she tried to find something to grab on to, gaining speed so that she rolled right past the midpoint landing.

Finally she reached the bottom, landing facedown, her arms and legs splashed out to the sides at awkward angles, a limp heap, right at Jared's feet.

Alexandra looked down. Jared dropped her bag on the floor and knelt down next to Chloe. Her bag. Alexandra rushed to the railing, clinging to it with her right hand as she started down the stairs. She looked to the foot of the stairs and saw a skinny man wearing a purple satin shirt. Right before her eyes, he leaned over, while every other eye in the room was on Chloe, and picked up her leather bag.

"Nooo!" she wailed.

She had to get there. It couldn't be snatched. Not right in front of her eyes. So close. She increased her speed, her eyes glued to the bag and the man turning toward the doors, oblivious to the frightened eyes lining the sides of the grand staircase and staring at her from the floor below. She let go of the rail, skipped one of the narrow steps, anxious to increase her speed . . . and then the rough sole of her shoe gripped the carpet, and she began to fall. ●

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Street Music

by J. A. Konrath

Mitch couldn't answer me with the barrel of my gun in his mouth, so I pulled it out.

"I don't know! I swear!"

If that was the truth, I had no use for it. After three days of questioning dozens of hookers, junkies, and other fine examples of Chicago's populace, Mitch was my only link to Jasmine. I was seriously jonesing; I hadn't done a line since Thursday. Plus, the pain in my side felt like a baby alligator was trying to eat its way out of my pancreas.

I gave Mitch's chin a little tap with the butt of the Glock.

"I really don't know!"

"She's one of yours, Mitch. I thought big, tough pimps like you ran a tight ship."

His black face was shiny with sweat and a little blood. Sure, he was scared. But he wasn't stupid. Telling me Jasmine's whereabouts would put a dent in his income.

I raised the gun back to hit him again.

"She went rogue on me, man! She ditched!"

I paused. If Jasmine had left Mitch, his reluctance to talk about it made some sense. Mack daddies don't like word to get out that they're losing their game.

"How much money do you have on you?"

"About four hundos. It's yours, man. Front pants pocket."

"I'm not putting my hand in there. Take it out."

Mitch managed to stop shaking long enough to retrieve a fat money clip. I took the cash and threw the clip—a gold emblem in the shape of a female breast—onto the sidewalk.

"You letting me go?" Mitch asked.

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Last month J. A. Konrath's story "On the Rocks" appeared in our Department of First Stories. The tale featured the heroine of Mr. Konrath's new novel, *Whiskey Sour* (June/Hyperion), police detective Jacqueline (Jack) Daniels. Daniels has only a cameo part in Mr. Konrath's new story for us. It's a more hard-boiled piece, quite a departure from the locked-room whodunit he surprised us with last time, but equally good.

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"You're free to pimp another day. Go run to the bus station, see if you can find some other fresh meat to bust out."

When I let go of his lapels, his spine seemed to grow back. He adjusted the collar on his velour jumpsuit and made sure his baseball hat was tilted to the correct odd angle.

"Ain't like that. I treat my girls good. Plenty of sweet love and all the rock they can smoke."

"Leave. Now. Before I decide to do society a favor."

He sneered, spun on his three-hundred-dollar sneakers, and did his pimp strut away from me.

I probably should have killed him; I had too many enemies already. But, tough as I am, shooting fourteen-year-old kids in the back isn't my style.

The four hundred was enough to score some coke, but not very much. I thought about calling Manny, my dealer, and getting a sample to help kill the pain, but every minute I wasted gave Jasmine a chance to slip farther away.

Pain relief would have to wait. I pressed my hand to my left side and exited the alley and wondered where the hell I should look next.

I'd already checked Jasmine's apartment, her boyfriend's apartment, her parents' house, her known pickup spots, and three local crackhouses.

To rule out other options, I had to call in a marker.

It was September, about seventy with clear skies, so I took a walk down the block. The first pay phone I came to had gum jammed in the coin slot. The second one smelled like a urinal, but I made do.

"Violent Crimes, Daniels."

"Hi, Jack. Phineas Troutt."

"Phin? Haven't seen you at the pool hall lately. Afraid I'll kick your ass?"

My lips twisted in a tight grin. Jacqueline Daniels was a police lieutenant who busted me a few years back. We had an on-again-off-again eight-ball game Monday nights. I'd missed a few.

"I'm sort of preoccupied with something."

"Chemo again?"

"No, work. Listen, you know what I do, right?"

"You're a freelance thug."

"I prefer the term *problem solver.* I keep it clean."

"I'm guessing that's because we haven't caught you in the act, yet."

"And you never will. Look, Jack, I need a favor."

"I can't do anything illegal, Phin. You know that."

"Nothing shady. I just have to rule some stuff out. I'm looking for a woman. Hooker. Name is Janet Cumberland, goes by the street nick Jasmine. Any recent arrests or deaths with that name?"

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There was a pause on the line. I could only guess Jack's thoughts.

"Give me half an hour," she decided. "Got a number where I can call you back?"

I killed time at a hot dog stand, sipping black coffee mixed with ten crushed Tylenol tablets; they worked faster when they were pre-dissolved.

The phone rang eighteen minutes later.

"No one at the morgue matching that name, and her last arrest was three months ago."

"Do you have a place of residence?"

Jack read off the apartment number I'd already checked.

"How about known acquaintances?"

"She's one of Mitch D's girls. Been arrested a few times with another prostitute named Georgia Williamson, street name is Ajax. Kind of an odd name for a hooker."

"She one of Mitch's, too?"

"Lemme check. . . . No, looks like she's solo."

"Got an addy?"

Jack gave it to me.

"There's also a note in Janet's file, says her parents are looking for her. That your angle? Even if you find her, the recid rate with crack is over ninety-five percent. They'll stick her in rehab and a week later she'll be on the street again."

"Thanks for the help, Jack. Next time we play pool, beer's on me."

"You're on, Phin. How's the—"

"Hurts," I interrupted. "But my doc says it won't for much longer."

"The tumor is shrinking? That's great news!"

I didn't correct her. The tumor was growing like a weed. I wouldn't be in pain much longer because I didn't have much longer.

Which is why I had to find Jasmine, and fast.

She had to die first.

Georgia Williams, a.k.a. Ajax, lived on 81st and Stoney, in a particularly mean part of Chicago's South Side. Night was rolling in, bringing with it the bangers, junkies, ballers, wannabes, and thugs. None of them were thrilled to see a white guy on their turf, and some flashed their iron as I drove by.

Ajax's place wasn't easy to find, and asking for directions didn't strike me as a smart idea. Maybe in neighborhoods this bad, whole buildings got stolen.

Finally, I narrowed it down to a decrepit apartment without any street number. I parked in front, set the alarm on my Bronco, and made sure I had one in the chamber.

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"You lost, white boy?"

I ignored the three gang members—Gangster Disciples according to their colors—and headed for the building. The front door had a security lock, but it was long broken. There was a large puddle of something in front of the staircase, which I walked around.

Ajax lived in 206. I took the stairs two at a time, followed a hall decorated with graffiti and vomit, and found her door.

"Georgia Williams? Chicago PD!"

Another door opened opposite me, fearful old eyes peeking out through the crack.

"Is Ms. Williams home?" I asked the neighbor.

The door closed again.

I kicked away a broken bottle that was near my feet and knocked again.

"Georgia Williams! Open the door!"

"You got ID?"

A woman's voice, cold and firm. I held a brass star, $12.95 on eBay, up to the peephole.

"Where's your partner?" asked the voice.

"Watching the car. We're looking for a friend of yours. Jasmine. She's in big trouble."

"She sure is."

"Can I come in?"

I heard a deadbolt snick back. Then another. The door swung inward, revealing a black girl of no more than sixteen. She wore jeans, a white blouse. Her face was garishly made-up. Stuck to her hip was a sleeping infant.

"Can't be long. Gotta go to work."

Ajax stepped to the side, and I entered her apartment. Expecting squalor, I was surprised to find the place clean and modestly furnished. The ceiling had some water damage, and one wall was losing its plaster, but there were nice curtains and matching furniture and even some framed art. This was the apartment of someone who hadn't given up yet.

"I'll be straight with you, Georgia. If we don't find Jasmine soon, it's very likely she'll be killed. You know about Artie Collins?"

She nodded, once.

"If you know where she is, it's in her best interest to tell me."

"Sorry, cop. I don't know nothing."

I took out my Glock, watched her eyes get big.

"Do you have a license for this firearm I found on your premises, Georgia?"

"Aw, this is—"

I got in her face, sneering.

"I'll tell you what this is. Six months in County, minimum. With your record, the judge won't even think twice. And say goodbye to

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your baby; when I get done wrecking this place, DCFS will declare you so unfit you won't be allowed within two hundred yards of anyone under age ten."

Her lips trembled, but there were no tears.

"You bastards are all the same."

"I want Jasmine, Ajax. She's dead if I don't find her."

I gave her credit for toughness. She held out. I had to topple a dresser and put my foot through her TV before she broke down.

"Stop it! She's with her boyfriend!"

"Nice try. I already checked Melvin Kincaid."

"Not Mel. She found a new guy. Named Buster something."

"Buster what?"

"I dunno."

I chucked a vase at the wall. The baby in her arms was wiggling, hysterical.

"I don't have his last name! But I got a number."

Georgia went for her purse on the bed, but I shoved the Glock in her face.

"I'll look."

The purse was the size of a cigarette pack, with rhinestone studs and spaghetti straps. A hooker purse. I didn't figure there could be much of a weapon in there, and was once again surprised. A .22 ATM spilled onto the bed.

"I'm sure this has a license."

Georgia didn't answer. I rifled through the packs of mint gum and condoms until I found a matchbook with a phone number written on the back.

"This it?"

"Yeah."

"Can't you shut that kid up?"

Georgia cooed to the baby, rocking it back and forth, while I picked up her .22 and removed the bullets. I tossed the gun back on the bed and put the lead and the matchbook in my pocket.

She got my evil face when I walked past her.

"If you warn her I'm coming, I'll know it was you."

"I won't say a damn thing, *Officer.*"

"I know you won't."

I fished out three of the hundreds I took from Mitch D, and shoved them into her hand. It was a lot more than the TV was worth.

"By the way, why do they call you Ajax?"

She shrugged. "I've robbed a few tricks."

"Meaning?"

"Ajax cleans out the johns."

When I got back outside, the three Disciples had multiplied into six, and they were standing in front of my truck.

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"This is a nice truck, white boy. Can we have it?"

My Glock 21 held thirteen forty-five-caliber rounds. More than enough. But Jack was the one who gave me this address, and if I killed any of these bozos she'd eventually get the word.

Dying of cancer was bad enough. Dying of cancer in prison was not on my to-do list.

Stuck in my belt, nestled along my spine, was a combat baton. Sixteen inches long, made of a tightly coiled steel spring. Because it could bend, it didn't break bones.

But it did hurt like crazy.

The Disciples had apparently expected me to tremble in fear, because I clocked three of them across the head before they went into attack mode.

The first one to draw was a thin kid who watched too many rap videos. He pulled a 9mm out of his baggy pants and thrust it at me sideways, with the back of his hand facing skyward.

Not only does this mess up your aim, but your grip is severely compromised. I gave him a tap across the back of the knuckles, and the gun hit the pavement. A second smack in the forehead opened up a nice gash. As with his buddies, the blood running into his eyes made him blind and worthless. I turned on the last two.

One had a blade. He held it underhanded, tip up, showing me he knew how to use it. After two feints, he thrust it at my face.

I turned, catching the tip on my cheek, and gave him an elbow to the nose. When he stumbled back, he also got a tap across the eyebrows.

The last guy was fifty yards away, sprinting for reinforcements.

I climbed in my Bronco and hauled out of there before they arrived.

"Hi, Jack, I need one more favor."

"You already owe me a night of beer."

"I'll also spring for pizza. I need an address to go with this number."

"Lemme have it."

I read it to her, hoping Georgia had been honest with me. I didn't want to pay another visit to Stoney Island.

"Buster McDonalds. Four-four-two-three Irving Park, Apartment Seven-oh-six."

"Thanks again, Jack."

"Listen, Phin, I asked around about Janet Cumberland. The word on the street is that Artie Collins put a contract out on her."

"I'll be careful."

There was a long pause on the line. I cut off her thought.

"I don't work for mobsters, Jack. I don't kill people for money."

"Watch yourself, Phin."

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She hung up.

I stopped at a drive-through, filled up on grease, and had ten more aspirin. My side ached to the touch. I had stronger stuff, doctor-prescribed, but that dulled the senses and took away my edge. I thought about scoring some coke, but the hundred I had left wouldn't buy much, and time was winding down.

I had to find Jasmine.

Buster's neighborhood was several rungs above Ajax's as far as quality of life went. No junkies shooting up in the alleys, hookers on the corners, or roving gangs of teens with firearms.

There were, however, lots of kids drunk out of their minds moving in great human waves from bar to bar. The area was a hot spot for night-life, and Friday night meant the partying was mandatory.

Even the hydrants were taken, so I parked in an alley, blocking the entrance. I took the duffel bag from the passenger seat and climbed out into the night air.

The temp had dropped, and I imagined I could smell Lake Michigan, even though it was miles away. There were voices, shouting, laughing, cars honking. I stood in the shadows.

The security door on Buster's apartment had a lock that was intact and functioning, unlike Ajax's. I spotted someone walking out and caught the door before it closed, and then I took the elevator to the seventh floor.

The cop impersonation wouldn't work this time; Jasmine was on the run and wouldn't open the door for anybody.

But I had a key.

It was another on-line purchase. There are thirty-four major lock companies in the U.S., and they make ninety-five percent of all the locks in America. These lock companies each have a few dozen models, and each of the models has a master key that opens up every lock in the series.

Locksmiths can buy these master keys. So can anyone with a credit card who knows the right Web site.

The lock on Buster's apartment was a Schlage. I took a large key ring from my duffel bag and got the door open on the third try.

Jasmine and Buster were on a futon, watching TV. I was on him before he had a chance to get up.

When he reached for me, I grabbed his wrist and twisted. Then, using his arm like a lever, I forced him facedown into the carpeting.

"Buster!"

I didn't have time to deal with Jasmine yet, so she got a kick in the gut. She went down. I took out a roll of duct tape and secured Buster's wrists behind him. When that was done, I wound it around his legs a few times.

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"Jazz, run!"

His mouth was next.

Jasmine had curled up in the corner of the room, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth. She was a little thing, no older than Ajax, wearing sweatpants and an extra-large T-shirt. Her black hair was pulled back and fear distorted her features.

I made it worse by showing her my Glock.

"Tell me about Artie Collins."

She shrunk back, making herself smaller.

"You're going to kill me."

"No one is killing anyone. Why does Artie want you dead?"

"The book."

"What book?"

She pointed to the table next to the futon. I picked up a ledger, scanned a few pages.

Financial figures, from two of Artie's clubs. I guessed that these were the ones the IRS didn't see.

"Stupid move, lady. Why'd you take these from him?"

"He's a pig," she spat, anger overriding terror. "Artie doesn't like it straight. He's a real freak. He did things to me, things no one has ever done."

"So you stole this?"

"I didn't know what it was. I wanted to hurt him, it was right there on the dresser. So I took it."

Gutsy, but dumb. Stealing from one of the most connected guys in the Midwest was a good way to shorten your life expectancy.

"Artie is offering ten thousand dollars for you. And there's a bonus if it's messy."

I put the book in the duffel bag, and then removed a knife.

Artie Collins was a slug, and everyone knew it. He had his public side—the restaurants, the riverboat gambling, the night clubs—but anyone worth their street smarts knew he also peddled kiddie porn and smack cut with rat poison, and owned a handful of cops and judges.

Standing before me, he even looked like a slug, from his sweaty, fat face to the sharkskin suit in dark brown, of all colors.

"I don't know you," he said.

"Better that way."

"I like to know who I'm doing business with."

"This is a one-time deal. Two ships in the night."

He seemed to consider that, and laughed.

"Okay then, Mystery Man. You told my boys you had something for me."

I reached into my jacket. Artie didn't flinch; he knew his men

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had frisked me earlier and taken my gun. I took out a wad of Polaroids and handed them over.

Artie glanced through them, smiling like a carved pumpkin. He flashed one at me. Jasmine naked and tied up, the knife going in.

"That's a good one. A real Kodak moment."

I said nothing. Artie finished viewing my camera work and carefully stuck the pics in his blazer.

"These are nice, but I still need to know where she's at."

"The bottom of the Chicago river."

"I meant, where she was hiding. She had something of mine."

I nodded, once again going into my jacket. When Artie saw the ledger, I thought he'd crap sunshine.

"She told me some things when I was working on her."

"I'll bet she did, " Artie laughed.

He gave the ledger a cursory flip through, then tossed it onto his desk. I took a breath, let it out slow. The moment stretched. Finally, Artie waggled a fat, hot-dog finger at me.

"You're good, my friend. I could use a man of your talents."

"I'm freelance."

"I offer benefits. A 401K. Dental. Plus whores and drugs, of course. I'd pay some good money to see you work a girl over like you did that whore."

"You said you'd also pay good money for whoever brought you proof of Jasmine's death."

He nodded slowly.

"You sure you don't want to work for me?"

"I don't play well with others."

Artie made a show of walking in a complete circle around me, checking me out. This wasn't going down as easy as I'd hoped.

"Brave man, to come in here all by yourself."

"My partner's outside."

"Partner, huh? Let's say, for the sake of argument, I had my boys kill you. What would your partner do? Come running into my place, guns blazing?"

He chuckled, and the two goons in the room with us giggled like stoned teenagers.

"No. He'd put the word out on the street that you're a liar. Then the next time you need a little favor from the outside, your reputation as a square guy would be sullied."

"Sullied!" Artie laughed again. He had a laugh like a frog. "That's rich. Would you work for a man with a sullied reputation, Jimmy?"

The thug named Jimmy shrugged, wisely choosing not to answer.

"You're right, of course," Artie said when the chuckles faded. "I have a good rep in this town, and my word is bond. Max."

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The other thug handed me a briefcase. Leather. A good weight.

"There was supposed to be a bonus for making it messy."

"Oh, it's in there, my friend. I'm sure you'll be quite pleased. You can count it, if you like."

I shook my head. "I trust you."

I turned to walk out, but Artie's men stayed in front of the door.

If Artie was more psychotic than I'd guessed, he could easily kill me right there, and I couldn't do a damn thing to stop him. I'd lied about having a partner, and the line about his street rep was just ego stroking.

I braced myself, deciding to go for the guy on the left first.

"One more thing, Mystery Man," Artie said to my back. "You wouldn't have made any copies of that ledger, maybe to try and grease me for more money sometime in the future?"

I turned around, gave Artie my cold stare.

"You think I would mess with you?"

His eyes drilled into me. They no longer held any amusement. They were the dark, hard eyes of a man who has killed many people, who has done awful things.

But I'd done some awful things, too. And I made sure he saw it in me.

"No," Artie finally decided. "No, you wouldn't mess with me."

I tilted my head slightly.

"A pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Collins."

The thugs parted, and I walked out the door.

When I got a safe distance away, I counted the money.

Fifteen thousand bucks.

I dropped by Manny's, spent two gees on coke, and did a few lines.

The pain in my side became a dim memory.

Unlike pills, cocaine took away the pain and let me keep my edge.

These days, my edge was all I had.

I didn't have to wait for someone to leave Buster's apartment building this time; he buzzed me in.

"Jazz is in the shower," he told me.

"Did you dump the bag?"

"In the river, like you told me. And I mailed out those photocopies to the cop with the alcohol name."

He gave me a beer, and Jasmine walked into the living room, wrapped in a towel. Her face and collarbone were still stained red from the stage blood.

"What now?" she asked.

"You're dead. Get the hell out of town."

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I handed her a bag filled with five thousand dollars. She looked inside, then showed it to Buster.

"Jesus!" Buster yelped. "Thanks, man!"

Jasmine raised an eyebrow at me. "Why are you doing this?"

"If you're seen around here, Artie will know I lied. He won't be pleased. Take this and go back home. Your parents are looking for you."

Jasmine's voice was small. The voice of a teenager, not a strung-out street whore.

"Thank you."

"Since you're so grateful, you can do me one small favor."

"Anything."

"Your friend. Ajax. I think she wants out of the life. Take her with you."

"You got it, buddy!" Buster pumped my hand, grinning ear to ear. "Why don't you hang out for a while? We'll tilt a few."

"Thanks, but I have some things to do."

Jasmine stood on her tiptoes, gave me a wet peck on the cheek. Then she whispered in my ear.

"You could have killed me, kept it all. Why didn't you?"

She didn't get it, but that was okay. Most people go through their whole lives without ever realizing how precious life is. Jasmine didn't understand that.

But someday she might.

"I don't kill people for money," I told her instead.

Then I left.

All things considered, I did pretty good. The blood, latex scars, and fake knife cost less than a hundred bucks. Pizza and beer for Jack came out to fifty. The money I gave to Ajax wasn't mine in the first place, and I already owned the master keys, the badge, and the Polaroid camera.

The cash would keep me in drugs for a while.

It might even take me up until the very end.

As for Artie Collins . . . word on the street, his bosses weren't happy about his arrest. Artie wasn't going to last very long in prison.

I did another line and laid back on my bed, letting the exhilaration wash over me. It took away the pain.

All the pain.

Outside my window, the city sounds invaded. Honking horns. Screeching tires. A man coughing. A woman shouting. The el train rushing past, clackety-clacking down the tracks louder than a thunderclap.

To most people, it was background noise.

But to me, it was music. ●

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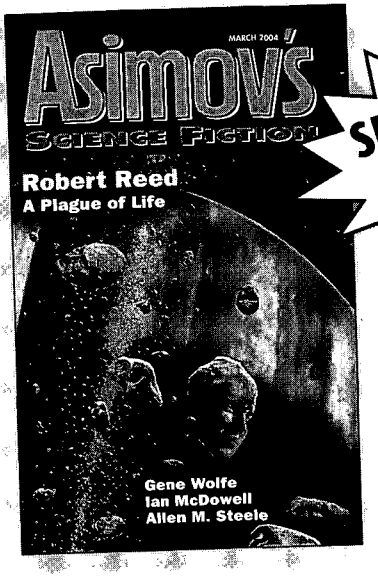

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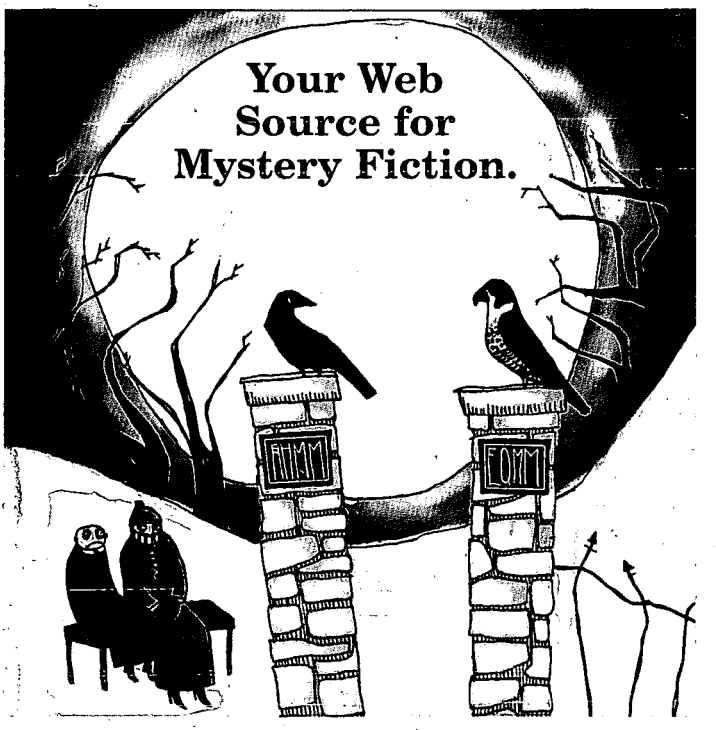

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